Ohio | Department of Job and Family Services

TO STRENGTHEN OHIO FAMILIES WITH SOLUTIONS TO TEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Ohio Adoption Guide

A Handbook for Prospective Adoptive Families

IT TAKES 100% Heart TO FOSTER AND ADOPT IN OHIO

They don't have to have your genes to have your heart.

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Welcome!

Welcome to Ohio's adoption community. This guide is designed to help you learn more about the adoption process. More than 1,000 Ohio children are joined with their adoptive families each year, and nearly 2,800 more are waiting to be adopted. You don't have to be rich, married or under 40 to adopt a child from foster care in Ohio. What you do need is 100% heart. Read on to learn more, and be sure to visit **FosterAndAdopt.jfs.ohio.gov**.

We wish you all the best as you begin your adoption journey!

Adoption Basics

What Is Adoption?

Adoption is a legal process that creates a lifelong relationship between a parent and child. Once the adoption of a child is approved by a court, the adoptive parents will receive an adoption decree and birth certificate, acknowledging that the child is a legal family member with all the rights and responsibilities of a birth child.

Who Can Adopt?

There are many kinds of adoptive families. The most important requirement for adoption is that the family must be able to provide a loving, stable and secure family for a growing child. Adoptive parents:

- Can be married, single, divorced or widowed, and all orientations
- May or may not have other children
- Must be at least 18 years old
- Can be renters or home owners
- Must have a stable income
- Can have any level of education

Is Adoption Right for Your Family?

Adoption is a decision for the entire family. It requires all family members to talk about what adoption might be like and how adopting a child or children will affect the family's current structure. Adoption may include adopting a relative or family friend whose parents are no longer able to provide care. Adoption by a kinship caregiver can keep a child out of foster care and in contact with relatives.

What Prospective Adoptive Families Should Consider

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) recommends that prospective adoptive families examine themselves through a self-assessment process. The following is an excerpt from an NACAC's manual called "How to Adopt."

"Children don't need perfect parents, just one or two individuals willing to meet the unique challenges of parenting and make a lifetime commitment to caring for and nurturing their children. One of the advantages of special needs adoption is that almost any responsible adult can become an adoptive parent. Prospective parents do not have to be rich, married, under 40, highly educated, or home owners to adopt. Far more important are personal characteristics like:

- a belief in adoption and an ability to commit;
- patience and perseverance;
- a good sense of humor and talent for keeping life in perspective;
- a love of children and parenting;
- the ability to roll with unexpected changes, stresses and challenges;
- the ability to deal with rejection without taking it personally;
- the ability to accept without judging;
- tolerance and understanding for your child's conflicting feelings and your own;
- an awareness that healing doesn't come quickly, all wounds cannot be healed, and your child may not attach to your family;
- the strength to be consistent and set limits;
- a willingness to learn new parenting techniques and advocate for your children's educational and medical needs; and resourcefulness.

"If you have all or most of those qualities, then ask yourself these questions:

- Do I clearly understand why I want to adopt?
- If applicable—Do my partner and I work as a team? Are we both committed to adoption?
- Does my lifestyle allow me the time necessary to meet the needs of a special child?
- Am I willing to change my lifestyle to accommodate the needs of a special child?

"Think carefully about your answers to these questions. Take the time to make a good decision, because it is a decision you and your adoptive child will live with for life.

"In addition, before seriously contemplating special needs adoption, prospective parents must honestly evaluate their desire and ability to successfully parent children who have troubling pasts and uncertain futures. Many children who become available for adoption at older ages have not received the early care that kids need to develop a strong sense of security, trust and self-esteem. Many also suffer from conditions caused by past trauma, or prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs. Children whose backgrounds include traumatic experiences, abuse and/or neglect may exhibit symptoms of distress, such as:

- aggressiveness
- attachment disorders
- attention deficits and hyperactivity
- poor peer relationships/social skills
- bed wetting
- defiance
- depression
- impulsiveness
- learning disabilities
- low self-esteem
- lying

"Fortunately, through therapy, medication, and consistent care, children can also find ways to overcome or at least better cope with many of these challenges.

"Most children put their new adoptive parents through a period of testing to see if the parents are truly committed or just waiting for an excuse to desert the child as others have done before. To improve your chances of successfully adopting a child who has special needs, be prepared to offer a home environment that combines extra love, support and attention with clear structure and consistent limit-setting. Parents should also be ready to actively advocate for their child at school, with peers and within the community. It can be immensely helpful for parents to have a support network or belong to an adoptive parent support group." [1]

[1] Retrieved from the North American Council on Adoptable Children's website at nacac.org/howtoadopt/howtoadopt.html (2013).

Researching Adoption Agencies

This guidebook does not discuss infant adoptions, adoptions using private attorneys or international adoptions. It does, however, discuss the process of adoption through a public children services agency (PCSA) or a private agency that works with the PCSA in completing adoptions from foster care.

Choosing an Adoption Agency

Many of the children available for adoption through PCSAs are classified as children with special needs. "Special needs" is a phrase used to identify children who have a harder time finding families willing to adopt them. "Special needs" is used to describe factors such as:

- Age
- Background
- Physical, mental and emotional challenges sometimes found among adoptable children
- Children who are part of a sibling group being placed together for adoption
- Children who are members of a minority group.

The first step in starting the adoption process is to contact your local PCSA or a private adoption agency. Each county has its own PCSA, and there are numerous private adoption agencies throughout the state. Find an agency that completes adoption homestudies in your area at **FosterAndAdopt.jfs.ohio.gov**.

Questions you may want to ask agencies as you decide which one to work with include:

- How many and what type of children has the agency placed in the past few years?
- How many children does the agency have legally available for adoption?
- What are the characteristics of those children?
- How does the agency work with other public and private agencies both in Ohio and outside Ohio?
- How long, on average, must one wait for a child?
- What are the agency's policies concerning adoption paperwork, educational classes and visits?
- Are adoption subsidies available, and how do I apply for them?
- What are the agency's homestudy requirements, and how do I start a homestudy?
- Have any of the agency's adoptions been disrupted in the past five years?
- Does the agency offer services to adopted children and families after finalization?
- What services—including parenting classes, support groups, activities, access to therapy and counseling, and respite care—will the agency provide before and after the child is placed in your home?

The Adoption Process

Attending Informational Meetings and Orientations

Agencies generally will invite people who have expressed an interest in adopting a child to an informational meeting and/or orientation. This meeting is designed to provide potential adoptive families with information about the homestudy process, pre-service training, and general information about the pre-placement and the finalization processes. The agency also may discuss supportive services available in the county.

Pre-Service Training

You will be asked to participate in educational sessions to learn more about the children who are available for adoption, as well as to determine your strengths as an adoptive parent. These educational sessions will explore adoption from every point of view and describe the needs of children in the children services system. The training will give the prospective adoptive parent realistic expectations about adoption and confidence in the ability to parent a waiting child. Topics discussed during pre-service include:

- The adoption process
- Child development and how it is impacted by abuse, neglect and trauma
- Separation and loss that children experience
- Understanding behaviors and dealing with child behaviors and attachment
- Defining diversity and cultural issues
- Adoption issues that relate to the child, birth family and adoptive family
- Community resources and the importance of advocating for your child

The Homestudy

The homestudy is a process of education and self-evaluation. It is a time for you and your assessor to look at your readiness to adopt, as well as identify special parenting abilities that you may offer to an adopted child. The process allows the adoptive family to look at its family structure and support system. During the homestudy, adoptive parents also will explore their beliefs, attitudes and coping skills. Your caseworker will meet with you and everyone living in your home to discuss the adoption process. Through a series of group and individual meetings, you will learn more about the kind of children you might best parent.

Topics discussed during the homestudy include the following:

- Motivation for wanting to adopt
- Your life experiences and history
- Your marriage or relationship with a significant other
- Your ability to support your family financially
- Your health
- Your support system

When you complete the application for adoption, you will be assigned an assessor who will work with your family to complete the homestudy process. The homestudy process can take up to six months to complete. However, many adoptive families may complete the homestudy process sooner.

During the homestudy process, your assessor is required to review certain documents. Such documents include:

- Medical statements for everyone living in the house
- Financial statement, including proof of income
- Verification of marriage or divorce
- Criminal background checks for household members over the age of 18
- Safety audit of the home

Families will receive notification when their homestudy has been completed and approved. In some cases, when the agency is not able to approve a homestudy, the family can meet with the assessor and, if needed, the accessor's supervisor or director, to discuss why the family was not approved and possible alternative options.

Matching Children and Families

Your assessor and agency will take into account the characteristics of children that you can best parent and the characteristics of children your homestudy approves you for when considering placement matches for your family. During a matching conference, adoption professionals consider the strengths, characteristics and needs of a waiting child, and compare those with the strengths and characteristics of waiting families. The length of time it takes to be matched with a child largely depends on the special characteristics of children that you are willing and able to parent. A family who demonstrates the ability to parent a child with many special needs may not wait long for placement.

When Your Agency Matches a Child with Your Family

When your assessor identifies a child who may be a good match for your family, he or she will contact you to share detailed information about the child's background. Such background information will include all known, non-identifying information about the child, including:

- Birth parents and other relatives
- Medical, emotional and psychological history
- Past and current developmental issues
- School history if applicable
- Placement history

Adoptive families also will receive the Child Study Inventory, which documents the child's interests, talents, traits and history, as well as the known history of the birth parents. Your assessor will give you time to think about the information and will be able to assist you in deciding whether to move forward with the matching process. Your assessor also will recommend that you discuss the child's information with your pediatrician or other professionals from whom you or your child may need services. If you decide to proceed with the match, your assessor will arrange a time for your family and the child to meet.

Prior to this meeting, the assessor may share your *Welcome Book* with the child, if your agency has requested that your family complete one.

This book, prepared by the prospective adoptive family, includes pictures and information about your family. Many adoptive families choose to include pictures of family members, family pets, the child's room, extended family members and friends. The *Welcome Book* helps in the preparation for the child's first meeting with his or her potential adoptive family.

Before the first meeting, your assessor also will help prepare you and your family. The assessor will give you and your family suggestions for who should be involved in the first meeting and what types of activities may be most comfortable for the child.

Following the first meeting, your assessor will arrange for a series of additional pre-placement visits in order for you, the child and the rest of the adoptive family to get to know one another. Pre-placement visits will be discussed with the foster parents or facility where the child resides in order to ensure the visitation schedule is acceptable to all involved parties. After the pre-placement visits, the child will join your family in your home.

Placement of the Child into an Adoptive Home

Once the child is placed with your family, you become responsible for the child's care. Your assessor will continue to visit with your family monthly after the adoptive placement. These visits are designed to help connect your new family with services and to discuss potential issues that may arise. After a minimum period of six months, your family will be eligible to petition the court to finalize the adoption.

Final Steps to Adoption

Legalizing an Adoption

Legalizing an adoption involves a short hearing at a probate court, during which adoptive parents are granted permanent legal custody of their adopted child. Following the adoption hearing, adoptive parents will work with their assessor and/or attorney to obtain the child's new birth certificate and final decree of adoption.

Post-Finalization Services

A variety of formal and informal services are available to members of the adoptive family, either as a group or as individuals. Support groups, counseling, respite care, medical services, educational resources and a variety of community resources may be available to help meet the family's ongoing needs. It is important for every family to realize that services and referrals will be needed after an adoption is final. Although types and locations of adoption services vary over time, you always can contact your child placement agency or **FosterAndAdopt.jfs.ohio.gov** for help locating services in your area.

Financial Support that May Be Available

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance was established by the federal government to provide financial support to encourage the adoption of eligible children with special needs. The concept of "special needs" often seems confusing. The term "special needs" describes circumstances that prevent or delay a child from being placed into an adoptive home. Federal law states that when determining a child's special needs, a state must make several determinations. This includes determining whether a specific factor or condition exists that would prevent the child from being placed with the adoptive parents if not for adoption assistance.

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance provides financial assistance to eligible families based on the child's special needs at the time of the adoptive placement. The benefits may include monthly adoption assistance payments and Medicaid eligibility.

The PCSA in the child's county is responsible for administering and determining eligibility for this program. If the child is not in the custody of a PCSA, then the PCSA in the adoptive parent's county determines whether the child meets the eligibility requirement. Contact your PCSA to learn more about Title IV-E Adoption Assistance.

State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy Program

The State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy (SAMS) program is a financial program designed to help adoptive families with expenses related to their adoptive child's ongoing therapy or treatment needs. SAMS provides monthly subsidy payments to families adopting children who (1) meet the criteria for "special needs" as defined by the Ohio Administrative Code and (2) are not eligible for Title IV-E Adoption Assistance.

The family's income is taken into consideration when determining eligibility for the SAMS program. The child may also be eligible for medical coverage under Medicaid.

The PCSA in your county administers and determines eligibility for SAMS. Contact your adoption assessor to learn more about the State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy program and to obtain an application.

Non-Recurring Adoption Expense Subsidy

Nonrecurring adoption expenses are one-time expenses directly related to the legal adoption of a child with special needs. This program provides payment or reimbursement for expenses such as supervision of placements prior to the adoption finalization, attorney's fees, court costs, reasonable costs of transportation, and food for the child and/or adoptive parent(s) when necessary to complete the placement or adoption process. Payment or reimbursement may also be available for costs associated with the adoption homestudy, health and psychological examinations related to the homestudy, and reasonable and necessary adoption fees. Family income is not taken into consideration.

Post-Adoption Special Services Subsidy

The Post-Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS) program is for all adoptive families (except stepparent adoptions) in Ohio whose children may be experiencing adoption-related

difficulties or issues that were preexisting, but were not apparent at the time of adoption. Such services are available to prevent the disruption of an adoption. PASSS services may include:

- Medical services
- Psychological services
- Psychiatric services
- Residential treatment
- Respite care

For more information regarding the PASSS program, please contact your county's PCSA.

Adoption Tax Benefits

Both Ohio and the federal government allow families who adopt to receive tax credits for the year in which the adoption was legalized.

The State Adoption Tax Credit is limited to a set amount per child. Any unused amounts can be carried forward for up to five years. For more information, talk to your tax professional, visit **tax.ohio.gov** or call the Ohio Department of Taxation at (800) 282-1780.

The Federal Adoption Tax Credit can be used for qualifying expenses paid to adopt an eligible child. Families have five years to use the entire credit. For more information, talk to your tax professional, visit **irs.gov** or call the IRS at (800) 829-1040.

Adoption Assistance Connections (AAC)

Adoption Assistance Connections provides financial assistance to eligible families who adopt children at ages 16 and 17 and then continue to support them as they transition to adulthood. Families may receive a monthly payment and/or Medicaid coverage, and that support may continue until the young adult reaches age 21, as long as other eligibility criteria are met. Unlike the other subsidies, which are administered by the counties, AAC is administered by the state. It was developed to help families who adopt older youth but are not eligible for continued Title IV-E Adoption Assistance when their child reaches age 18.

To be eligible, the young adults must meet all of the following criteria:

- Have been in the permanent custody of an Ohio PCSA
- Were 16 or 17 when the Adoption Assistance Agreement was signed
- Had finalized adoptions before they turned 18
- Not be married
- Not be in the military
- Have adoptive parent(s) who are continuing their parental responsibility

Participating young adults also must meet at least ONE of the following five requirements:

- Completing secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential
- Enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education
- Participating in a program or activity designed to promote, or remove barriers to, employment
- Employed for at least 80 hours a month
- Incapable of doing any of the above activities due to a medical condition, as documented by a qualified practitioner

Building Families through Adoption

Being in a family offers all of us a chance to grow as humans and reach our greatest potential. Parenting can bring out the best in us. The need to care for and nurture another human, especially a child, is a strong human emotion and impulse.

On any given day, nearly 16,000 children in Ohio are living with foster families or in other out-of-home placements. Nearly 2,800 children have had their biological parents' rights terminated. Most of those children are residing with foster families while they wait for their forever families. These children, who are in the custody of local children service agencies, may be dealing with issues of trauma from past abuse, neglect and/or dependency. They need permanent families.

Each year in Ohio, more children become legally available for adoption than Ohio agencies are able to place. If you are ready to get started, you can find an agency that completes adoption homestudies in your area at **FosterAndAdopt.jfs.ohio.gov**. We hope that you want to become an adoptive parent. However, if you decide that adoption is not right for your family, you still can help support children and families. For instance, you could:

- Become a CASA (Court appointed Special Advocate) for a child
- Become a mentor to a child
- Talk with other people about adoption and Ohio's waiting children
- Distribute adoption recruitment materials within your church and community

Common Adoption Terms

Adoption: The creation, by a court of competent jurisdiction, of parental rights and responsibilities between a child and an adult. This includes the termination of all parental rights and responsibilities that have not yet been surrendered or terminated by court order between other persons and the child.

Adoption agency: An entity that provides one or more of the following services: homestudy services for potential adoptive parents, counseling for birth parents, placement services for children in need of adoption, post-placement/pre-legalization services and post-legalization/finalization services.

Adoption triad: The three primary groups of people affected by the adoption: the birth parents, the child and the adoptive parent(s).

Attachment: An emotional bond between two people that lasts over a long period of time and helps each person reach his or her potential and feel secure and connected.

Birth parent: A biological parent of an adopted person.

Closed adoption: An adoption in which birth and adoptive families have no legal connection to each other.

Finalization: See "Legalization."

Foster-adopt placement: In general, the term used to describe "legal risk placements" (see definition) and/or the adoption by foster parents of a child who is currently placed in their home with an initial plan of reunification with birth parents, but whose plan has been changed to the goal of adoption, after diligent attempts at reunification have failed. In Ohio, many agencies offer a combined homestudy process so the applicant becomes a licensed foster parent and is approved to adopt at the end of the process.

Guardian ad litem: A guardian appointed by the juvenile court to represent and protect the best interest of a child who is alleged or adjudicated to be abused, neglected or dependent.

Homestudy: A process by which potential foster and adoptive parents educate themselves about the challenges and rewards offered through caring for foster and adopted children, and assess their own skills, life experiences and strengths to determine the type of children they could best parent.

Identifying information: Information such as name, address, place of employment or Social Security number, which could significantly help one individual locate another individual.

Independent adoption: An adoption facilitated by an attorney.

Interstate adoption: The adoptive placement of a child (or children) who is a resident of one state with an adoptive family who resides in a different state.

The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC): A uniform law enacted by states and jurisdictions of the United States that establishes orderly procedures for the placement of children across state lines and for assigning responsibilities for those involved in placing children.

Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (ICAMA): An interstate compact that formalizes cooperation among party states and provides standardized procedures for arranging for medical assistance and services for adopted special needs children and their families when a state adoption assistance agreement or a federal adoption assistance agreement is in effect.

Legalization: Also called "finalization," the legal act that establishes a legal family connection between the adopting person and the adopted person. Usually done in a courtroom setting, it grants rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parent and child equal to those rights and responsibilities granted to families created by birth.

Legally free for adoption: A child is legally free when the parental rights of birth or legal parents have been terminated.

Legal risk placement: A placement of a child with a family who is interested in adopting the child, even though the child placed is not legally free. The placement family usually is both a certified foster family and an approved adoptive home. The risk is that the parents' rights may not be terminated, and the court may order the child to be returned to the parent(s) or a suitable relative. The benefit is that this type of placement decreases the number of placements a child may have.

Lifebook: A record of the child's life, which helps identify events in the child's past, including what happened while in agency care. It includes a chronological listing of important events and relationships in the child's life, and may include photographs.

Loss: The emotional and psychological state experienced when someone temporarily or permanently is separated from someone or something to which they have an emotional attachment or need. All loss causes emotional trauma, though the degree varies.

Medicaid: A type of medical insurance provided through the state, using combined federal and state funds, that most children who are considered to have special needs are entitled to receive. This can be used in conjunction with the adoptive family's medical insurance.

Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA): A federal law enacted in 1994 and amended in 1996 that prohibits an adoption agency from delaying or denying the placement of any child on the basis of race, color or national origin.

Non-recurring costs: One-time expenses incurred by a person adopting a child, such as travel, legal and homestudy-related costs. These are frequently reimbursable through federal and local funds when adopting a waiting child.

Open adoption/Openness: A wide continuum of adoption options that recognize the child's connection to both the birth family and adoptive family; usually involves an agreement made by the birth and adoptive parents to share information, or to have ongoing contact. In Ohio, these agreements are legal but non-binding.

Parent support groups: Formal or informal groups of adoptive parents and potential adoptive parents coming together to share information and resources. They often offer friendship, emotional support and recreational activities for adoptive family members. Support groups form for a variety of reasons, usually based on a shared interest or characteristic.

Post Adoption Special Services Subsidy (PASSS): A unique subsidy program designed to assist Ohio families whose children may be experiencing adoption-related difficulties or issues after the finalization of their adoption.

Photo listings: Published photographs and descriptions of waiting children that are used by agencies and individuals to recruit potential families.

Post-finalization services: Services provided or arranged by a local agency to support, maintain and assist an adopted child, adoptive family or birth parent any time after an adoption is finalized.

Respite care: Services designed to provide temporary relief of child-caring functions. These services may include paid individuals who provide child care within the home or outside the home.

Special needs: A need or circumstance that may be a barrier to placement or adoption, such as emotional or physical disorders, age, race, inclusion in a sibling group, a history of abuse, or other factors.

State Adoption Maintenance Subsidy Program: A state-funded adoption subsidy program intended to make permanent homes possible for children with special needs. This subsidy is negotiated on a case-by-case basis and is frequently granted if a child with special needs is ineligible for the federal Adoption Assistance program.

Surrender: Also known as "relinquishment," the voluntary termination of parental rights by a legal parent.

Termination of parental rights: The legal severing of ties between a parent and his or her child. These parental rights and responsibilities may be voluntarily surrendered by the parent or, if the parent is proven unable to meet the child's long-term needs, may by severed involuntarily through the court system.

Title IV-E Adoption Assistance: Created by the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, these programs provide federal financial support for children who are described as having special needs who are adopted. In addition to a monthly monetary payment, children who are "IV-E eligible" are entitled to a state medical card and certain services under the federal Title XX program. (See "state adoption subsidy" for information on state financial programs.)

Trauma: Adverse experiences that can have lasting negative effects on a person's social, emotional, cognitive and behavioral well-being.

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JFS 01675 (Rev. 9/2019)

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