



Chapter 1

Adoption Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding adoption: What it is and what it isn't
 - ▶ Knowing what happens when you adopt
 - ▶ Getting to know the people involved in the process
 - ▶ Preparing to spend time and money
 - ▶ Anticipating issues you'll face as an adoptive family
 - ▶ Becoming a fearless parent
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Some cultures believe that children visit their parents in dreams before they are born — that the child's soul somehow recognizes its parent's soul and is drawn to it, despite the boundaries of time and space and even physical existence. Whether you accept this belief or not, it is a compelling idea, don't you think? That something other than conventional ties — genetic ties, historical ties, racial or ethnicity ties — joins people together and that this connection exists beyond time. Maybe adoption is simply what this mystery looks like after bureaucrats get hold of it.

Part of adoption is the practical stuff: the filling out of papers, the home studies and interviews, the things you cross off your list and store away in your closet as you wait. But the other part is the indefinable thing that makes adoption — having a child who is so completely yours that your heart seems to beat in time with his or hers — as mysterious and miraculous as conception and birth.

The mechanics are slightly different, true. After all, sex is optional in adoption (but then, nowadays, it is in some conceptions, too), the wait may be a few weeks or a few years, and your child may come to you in the gangly body of a preteen or the teetering one of a toddler. But in the end, your child is your child. This chapter gives you a quick tour of what adoption is, what you do when you adopt, what you need to know, and where to go to get more detailed information.

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Defining Adoption

Most dictionaries define adoption, in more or fewer words, as the creation of a parent-child bond where one wouldn't exist naturally. In other words, when you adopt, you legally become the parent of a child born to someone else. That means, in the eyes of the state, you assume legal and custodial responsibility for the child, and the child has the same legal rights (inheritance and so on) as any child born to you.

Of course, the legal aspect of adoption is important because it confers rights and responsibilities where none would have existed otherwise. And this definition is technically accurate, as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough. When you adopt, you become more than the legal parent of a child. You become that child's mom or dad — in your heart, in your mind, in your body, and in your soul.



Conceiving and bearing children is one way to build a family. Adoption is merely another way to accomplish the same goal. In that way, adopting a child is different only in the process, not in the result.

Exploring common myths

Many people have misconceptions about adoption. And who can blame them? If you form your opinion about adoption from how it's often portrayed on sitcoms or in film or — heaven forbid — on daytime talk shows, you'd think that the whole enterprise is filled with a bunch of crazy adults, confused kids, and annoying social services personnel. The following sections cover some of the more potent presumptions about adoption. Of course, these explanations are no match for Jerry Springer, but then, what is?

Myth 1: It's a lesser relationship

Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone.

Blood is thicker than water.

Blood will tell.

He's blood.

All of these phrases speak to one thing: the presumed primacy of the connection between people who share the same bloodline. The concept that a genetic link is one of the main, if not *the* main, foundation of human relations leads to one of the biggest misconceptions people have about adoption: that it is, in

some way, a lesser relationship because the parents didn't conceive and bear their child. Without the physical link, the thinking goes, the same deep bond can't exist between adoptive parents and their children.

Yes, adopting a child is different from bearing a child, but not in the ways you may think. True, adoptive parents don't share a genetic link with their child, but don't mistakenly assume that this is the only physical bond between parents and their kids. Tell an adoptive mother that she didn't labor for her child, for example, and she can probably rattle off reams of things she had to do, publicly and privately, to bring her child home. Or tell an adoptive father who falls asleep with his baby on his chest that he doesn't have a physical connection to that child. Or dare to suggest to the woman standing at the bus stop on the first day of kindergarten or the father who watches his daughter walk across the stage at her graduation that the tears they're holding back are less real or less genuine or in some way less heartfelt because the only thing they haven't shared with their children is DNA.



It's not genetics that creates the parent-child bond. It's love and shared experience and commitment.

Myth 2: It's a secret

Once upon a time you didn't talk about adoption. It ranked right up there with unwed mothers and extramarital affairs as a taboo topic. Not only did you *not* talk about it, but sometimes you didn't even share the information with the most important person involved: the child. And if you did share it, you waited until he or she was old enough to "take" the news. The reason for the secrecy? Fear of the stigma of being "illegitimate" and the whole notion of the sins of the fathers tainting the sons.

Adoption arrangements themselves often were closed — that is, the birth-mother and the adoptive families were kept absolutely separate and their identities secret. Birth moms had no say in adoptive placements, and adoptive parents who wanted personal information, beyond what the agencies provided, had little or no recourse. Court records on adoptions were sealed, making it difficult even for the child to discover the identity of his birthparents.

Thankfully, things today are a lot different:

- ✓ The stigma of adoption is, if not dead, hopefully taking its last painful breath. First, the idea of illegitimacy — of a child somehow not being "right" because the people who conceived him weren't married — is going by the wayside. Also becoming outdated is the notion that children somehow are receptacles for their parents' sins. These changes are good because every child should be able to embrace his life story, however it began.

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- ✓ Most adoptions in the United States are open or semi-open, meaning that birthmothers and adoptive parents can arrange to have the contact that they feel comfortable with. (To find out more about open and semi-open adoptions, head to Chapter 2; Chapter 15 covers the types of contact that can be arranged.) In addition, all adoption professionals and nearly anyone else who knows anything about it agree that children have the right to know about their adoption, and the adoption story — the story you share with your child about how she came into your family — is a great way to share that information.
- ✓ Many states have taken steps to help adopted children find out information about their birthparents. Some have opened all adoption records; others provide registries for people wanting to be reconnected. For details on how to conduct a search for birthparents and the type of information you can get, head to Chapter 19.

Myth 3: It's a competition

Adoption is both happy and sad. One family's loss is another family's gain. One woman will have empty arms, and another's will be full. Because of this paradox, many people mistakenly assume that the birthparents and the adoptive parents are, in some way, competing or at cross-purposes. Who is, after all, the "true" parent — the one who bears the child or the one who raises her?

Before you answer, think about this: All parents — birth and adoptive — want the same thing: for their children to grow up happy, healthy, safe, and loved and for their children to fulfill the potential within themselves. The only possible answer, then, is that true parents are the ones who give that opportunity to their children. If you recognize that birthparents and adoptive parents achieve this goal together, then you understand the nature of adoption.

Getting the language right, PAL

The phrases that people commonly used in the past (and that less informed people still use today) to describe or define adoption have negative connotations. How would you feel, for example, if someone asked, "Why didn't your real mom want you?" The language in this question implies that 1) the mother you have isn't the one you really belong to and 2) that you weren't placed for adoption because your birthmother wasn't prepared to be a parent; you were placed for adoption because she didn't want *you*.

So in comes PAL, which stands for Positive Adoption Language. This is the language you'll hear when you talk with adoption professionals, and it's the language you should use when *you* speak about adoption. Table 1-1 lists some phrases and terms that you should use and that you should avoid.

Table 1-1 Positive Adoption Language	
<i>Positive Language</i>	<i>Negative Language</i>
Birthparent	Real parent or natural parent
Birth child	Own child, real child, natural child
My child	My adopted child
Born to unmarried parents	Illegitimate
Make an adoption plan	Give up, put up for adoption
Decide to parent her baby	Keeping her baby
International adoption	Foreign adoption
Adoption triad	Adoption triangle
Child in need of a family	Unwanted child
Unplanned pregnancy	Unwanted pregnancy
Could not conceive or could not carry pregnancy	Could not have children
Parent	Real parent
Search	Track down

Distinguishing between adoption and foster parenthood

Many people mistakenly assume that adoption is like foster care, in that the role of the adoptive parent is to care for the child until he or she is grown or until the “real” parent can resume that responsibility. Although there are some similarities between adopting a child and fostering a child (both result in people caring for children born to others and both are arrangements based on love), the goals are different.

In adoption, the child’s legal relationship with the birthparents has been ended, either voluntarily or by court order (see Chapter 11 for details on how children become available for adoption). The adoptive parents become the child’s parent in every way and permanently. The goal is the creation of the adoptive family.

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In a foster relationship, the foster parents care for a child in need while the state agency works with birthparents toward reunifying the family or, barring that, toward terminating the parents' rights. Foster parents care for the child's physical and emotional needs with the understanding that the state's goal, if all goes well, is to return the child to his or her birthparents.

Many states require or recommend that people adopting through state agencies first become foster parents for the following reasons:

- ✓ The arrangement helps state agencies, many of which are in dire need of loving homes for children in the child welfare system.
- ✓ If you're interested in adopting an older child, as the foster parent, you may be able to adopt the child in your home if he or she does become available for an adoption.
- ✓ Remaining in the home they've already adjusted to, rather than being taken to another placement, is much better for the older children who become available for adoption.
- ✓ You may be more comfortable committing to an adoption of an older child if you've already parented that child as a foster parent.



If you're interested in adopting from state agencies or fostering children in their care, call your local welfare office for information. Keep in mind, though, that fostering isn't a substitute for adoption. It takes a special mind-set to foster a child. You have to be able to put aside your needs as a parent so that, if the time comes, you can let that child go.

Looking at the Adoption Process: What Happens When?

One big question people have when they begin the adoption process is "How do things work?" — meaning, what happens when? Basically two important things happen separately:

- ✓ You decide you want to adopt and take the steps necessary to qualify and prepare yourself for a child.
- ✓ A child becomes available either because the state has terminated the birthparents' parental rights or because the birthparents have voluntarily relinquished those rights.

In all U.S. adoptions (both domestic and international), those processes remain separate and don't converge until the end, when a child is actually placed in your home.



Although in open and semi-open adoptions and in many attorney-facilitated adoptions (explained in Chapter 2), you may have an agreement or an understanding with a particular woman that she will place her child with you when that child is born, *nothing* can compel or force her to follow through. So, although you may be very involved with her and feel connected to the child she carries, her decision is her own, and you have no legal or moral say in what she decides. And she could very well decide to parent her baby herself.

The following sections briefly outline the process you follow when you adopt, and explain what makes a child available for adoption.

You: Working toward adoption

Obviously the first thing you need to do when you adopt is to make the decision that adoption is a good choice for you. It isn't for everybody (head to Chapter 6 for things you should think about before you decide to pursue adoption). Some people, in their heart of hearts, don't want to or don't believe that they can truly be the parents of children born to someone else. That's okay. All people have a right to their own dreams of a family. But if this describes you, don't adopt.

Once you decide that adoption is a good choice for your family, you need to hook up with people who can help you bring that dream to fruition. That means that you need to find an agency or an attorney to work with. Choosing an agency or attorney to help you is one of the most important decisions you make because these people have such a huge impact not only in how the process goes but in how you feel about what happens. For these reasons, you need to shop around, do research on the options available, and make an informed decision. Chapter 7 explains what you need to look for in the agencies and attorneys you're considering.

After you find an agency or attorney to work with, you're going to find yourself very busy with the process (see Chapter 9). If you're working with an agency, you have the home study to look forward to, the assignments (like putting together a profile of your family, filling out all sorts of necessary forms, and amassing all the documentation you'll need). If you're adopting internationally, you'll also be preparing for your trip to your child's birth country. You also have the wait — the time you spend waiting for the call that your child has been born or is available and ready to come home. (Chapter 10 suggests ways to keep your sanity and use the time wisely during the waiting period.)

All this work and waiting eventually lead to placement for domestic adoptions (when the child is actually placed in your home) or the referral of a child in international adoptions (when the child is assigned to you and is waiting for

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all the government paperwork to clear so you can bring her home). In both scenarios, your child is yours, but the adoption isn't done yet. If you're adopting domestically, you have the supervision period ahead of you. During this time, the social worker checks in to see how things are going with you and your new family member. If you're adopting from another country, you're waiting for the time when you can travel to your child's birth country and bring her home.

The finalization hearing follows the supervision period (see Chapter 12). Finalizing your adoption is exactly what it sounds like: the end of the adoption process, when your child legally becomes your child forever. After your finalization hearing, which takes place in a county within your state (for domestic adoptions) or in the child's birth country (for international adoptions), the adoption is done — that is, unless you're adopting internationally and have to re-adopt back in the States (Chapter 3 explains when re-adoption of a foreign-born child may be necessary).

This process can take anywhere from a couple of months to a few years. The length of the process depends on several factors. Some of these things you can control (like whom you work with and how open you are in what you'll consider), but others you can't (like whether a birthmother follows through with her adoption plan). But one thing is certain: Once you make the decision to adopt (and are approved by an agency), your chances of getting a child are practically guaranteed.

Your child: Becoming available

While you're busy preparing yourself for a family (or an addition to your family, as the case may be), other events are going on absolutely outside of your control.

Before you can adopt domestically, the parental rights of your child's birthparents have to be relinquished voluntarily by the birthparents or terminated by the state.

In most cases, if you adopt an infant domestically, the birthparents (usually the birthmother, but occasionally the birthfather, too) have voluntarily relinquished their rights. That means that they've made an adoption plan and have contacted an agency or lawyer to help them. Keep in mind, though, that they can't actually give up their parental rights before the child's birth. Despite all the work they may do to prepare themselves for the culmination of their decision (the counseling, the selecting of an adoptive family, and so on), they can't actually sign the consent forms (the legal forms that end their status as the child's parents) until after the child is born.

In most adoptions of older children, the state has terminated the birthparents' rights because of abuse, neglect, or abandonment. Before taking this step, the state generally works with the birthparents in the hopes that they'll be able to acquire the parenting skills they need in order to reunite the family. Failing this, the state begins termination hearings. The termination process, from beginning to end, can take years. Chapter 11 explains this topic in more detail.

If you're adopting internationally, your child has to meet both his birth country's criteria for orphan status *and* the U.S. criteria for orphan status. Although the definition of an orphan may differ in the specifics from country to country, basically, the following criteria have to be met:

- ✓ The birthparents, if they're living, have voluntarily ceded their rights to the child or have had their rights terminated according to their country's laws.
- ✓ If the birthparents are dead or incapacitated, no other relative is available to raise the child.



Most people assume (rightly) that adoption laws differ from country to country. What many people don't know is that adoption laws differ from state to state within the United States, too. Because a lot of legalities have to happen for a child to be cleared for adoption, either domestically or internationally, make sure that the agency or attorney you're working with knows all the adoption laws that apply.

It Takes (Half) a Village: Meeting the Folks Involved

Building a family through adoption is practically a community effort. You can't do it alone. You need the help and services of several different people. The following sections identify who's involved and what role they play.

The birthparents

Obviously, other than you, the birthparents are the most significant people in your adoption. Without them, you wouldn't have your child. Whether you ever have contact with your child's birthparents or not, they'll be important to you:

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- ✓ First, their decisions during the adoption process directly impact your family, and when all is said and done, those decisions made it possible for you to have your child.
- ✓ Second, these people may someday be important to your child. Most children who've been adopted have questions about their birthparents (who they were, what they looked like) and the decisions they made (mainly, why did they make an adoption plan?). Even if your child isn't particularly interested in finding his birthparents (some kids aren't), he may still want medical information that can only come from them.

Head to Part III for a complete discussion about birthparents: who they are, how they can impact your adoption, and the type of contact you can have with them during the adoption process and beyond.

The social worker

When you adopt, expect to work, at some point, with a social worker. Although the media have a tendency to portray social workers as Mary Kay ladies channeling Torquemada, don't believe it. If you adopt through a public or private agency, the social worker is your best friend in the business. She's your advocate and your information source. She's also the one who leads you through the sometimes labyrinthine process of adopting a child in the United States, performs your home study, and keeps you informed as your adoption progresses. (For information on working with an agency, go to Chapter 2. To find out what to look for in the agency you work with, head to Chapter 7.)

If you work with an attorney or a facilitator (Chapter 7 explains how to find reputable ones), your only contact with a social worker may be during your home study. The social worker evaluates whether your home is a suitable one for a child and makes a judgment about whether you'd make good parents. Even if your relationship with her is short-lived, it's still an important one because her impressions can impact your adoption.

The attorney

All adoptions require the services of an attorney. If you work through an agency, you still need an attorney to do the legal work associated with the adoption (filing the adoption petition in court, being present to represent you on your finalization day, and so on).

Many families choose to work solely with attorneys in their adoptions. In these situations, the attorney does more than the legal work. She also acts in the role of an adoption agency, often locating birthmothers or children available for adoption or guiding you in finding a birthmother who wants to place her baby for adoption.

For information on attorney-assisted adoptions, head to Chapter 2. To find out how to locate a reputable attorney, go to Chapter 7.

Da judge

You can't finalize an adoption without going to court, standing (or sitting) before a judge, and swearing, under oath, that you know what you're doing. Actually, the court proceeding requires a little more than that (head to Chapter 12 to find out what). Nevertheless, the judge is the sweetheart of the whole deal because he's the one who makes everything final. No matter how long you've waited, no matter how many detours your adoption journey included, when the judge stamps those papers with the official seal, your child is your child forever. In fact, you very well may decide that the judge, on your finalization day, is your very favorite person in the whole world.

A myriad of other people

If you're adopting internationally, in addition to the people in the States who you're working with (see the preceding sections), you have contact with a whole cadre of other people in your child's birth country. These people usually include

- ✓ The attorney in your child's birth country
- ✓ The person who meets you at the airport and takes you everywhere you need to go and translates for you (sometimes this person is the attorney; sometimes it's someone else)
- ✓ Orphanage personnel or foster parents (referred to as *nannies* in some countries, including Chile and Guatemala)
- ✓ The other families you'll probably travel with, stay in the same hotel with, get your child with, and go through the whole process with
- ✓ Possibly a social worker in your child's birth country

Spending Time and Money: You'll Probably Need Both

Two big concerns that folks have about adoption are the amount of money it costs and the amount of time it takes. With the common perception being that you have to have thousands of dollars at your disposal and years to wait, many people think of adoption as a luxury they can't afford or aren't young enough to pursue. The following sections outline basic information about the cost — time- and money-wise — of adoption.

Fees, fees, and more fees — and then some

Unfortunately, the perception that adoption costs a load of money isn't entirely wrong. American adoptions — particularly the adoption of healthy infants — does cost money. The amount varies, depending on the fees your agency or attorney charges and the expenses you may need to cover for the birthmother during her pregnancy, and it can range from a few to several thousand dollars.



The important thing to know is that adoption is possible for most people, even those of modest means. Many private agencies (who place primarily infants) base their fees on income. So although the total amount still isn't chump change, it can be manageable. Adopting older children (who are often placed by state welfare agencies) costs only a nominal fee, if it costs anything at all.

Head to Chapter 4 for more detailed information on the money matters: what you *have* to pay for, what you *may* have to pay for, and what you *can't* pay for, as well as some creative ideas on how to raise the money you need.

Some day, our prince (or princess) will come

When the subject of time and adoption comes up, you generally hear two typical scenarios: the “we put our application in on a Friday and got the call on a Monday” scenario, and the “we've waited so long for our first child that now we're too old for number two” scenario. Although either is possible, most adoptions fall between those two extremes. Typically, you can expect to wait anywhere from six months to two years for a placement.

The hardest part, of course, is not knowing whether your adoption falls into the six-month category or the two-year category. Here are some factors that affect how long you wait:

- ✔ **How open you are in your stated preferences:** You certainly can specify that you will only consider a healthy newborn boy with dark curly hair and blue eyes and a dimple on his left cheek. Doing so, however, will automatically take you out of consideration for any child who doesn't fit that description.
- ✔ **Whether you want a healthy infant or an older child or child with special needs:** Many adoptive parents specify healthy infants. If you're one of them, you're in a popular crowd and can expect the wait to be longer. Because fewer families are open to older children or children with special medical needs, those who are usually get placements more quickly.
- ✔ **Whether you go with an attorney or an agency:** Although not a hard-and-fast rule, adoptions through attorneys generally take between six months and a year, and can be impacted by how aggressive you are in locating a birthmother if that isn't a service your attorney provides. Agency adoptions usually can take a little longer (between six months and two years), the time often depends on how many adoptive families the agency has on its waiting list and how many children the agency places every year, on average.
- ✔ **How much money you have:** More money usually means more options. And options give you a leg up in the adoption world. No, it's not fair. And no, people with money don't deserve those options any more than other people do. But the fact is, the more money you have to invest in building your family, the more quickly it usually happens.
- ✔ **Dumb luck:** Who knows why things happen the way they do? Never discount the "it was meant to be" mentality, and be prepared for anything.

Examining Adoption Issues You and Your Child(ren) Will Face

People commonly refer to the finalization hearing as the time when the adoption is over. Actually, to be technically accurate, the *process* is finished, but the adoption lasts a lifetime. Your child will always be a child born to someone else. And, as an adoptive family, you're going to face issues that people who give birth to their children don't.

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Common worries

If you're just beginning to consider adoption, you may have a few concerns. Most people do. Many of these worries tend to fall into two categories: the genetic stuff (everything that has to do with the fact that you and your child don't share the same genetic background) and the birthparent stuff (everything to do with the fact that someone else out in the world has a connection to your child that you don't). Here are some of the highlights:



✓ **Fear of unknown health issues:** If you had given birth to your child, you may think that you'd know what conditions may lurk in his or her genes. When you adopt, if you don't know the family history — or if the one you get is sketchy, to say the least — how can you know that everything will be okay? The truth is, you don't (of course, you don't know with birth children either). But remember that reputable agencies make you aware of any risk factors that they know about so that you can make a decision that's right for you.

Your healthy infant may develop a lifelong condition; your child who was born addicted to cocaine may flourish without any long-lasting effects. When you adopt, you must accept the unknowns and commit to your child no matter what — just as any parent would do.

✓ **Worries about bonding:** A lot of press has been given to bonding and how important it is to a child's development. You may wonder whether, if you weren't there to bond with your child during the first days or weeks or even years of his life, can the two of you bond now? The answer is almost always yes. Once you begin to care for your child and your child responds to you and grows to rely on you for the care and love she needs, you'll bond. If you're adopting an older child, bonding may take more time (and you'll probably have to do it without the warm fuzzies that make you feel good), but it still happens.

✓ **Fears that the birthmother will change her mind and reclaim your child:** Who hasn't seen news stories detailing some horrible adoption scenario in which the birthparents and adoptive parents end up in court fighting over the child? The story is so compelling because it speaks to every parent's biggest fear: losing a child. For adoptive parents, these scenarios are particularly frightening. But keep these things in mind:

- Nearly all adoptions end successfully.
- A reputable agency counsels a birthmother on all her options (not just adoption) and then helps her make a decision that is right for her. Because the birthmother isn't pressured or coerced into making an adoption plan, chances are she'll follow through because, as difficult as it is, she made the decision for herself. Furthermore, if the agency has reason to believe that a birthmother will change her mind or that a birthfather will challenge the placement, it won't place that child in an adoptive home.

- In most states, after the birthmother signs the consent forms, she can't simply reclaim her child. She must prove that she was forced to sign, lied to, or not in her right mind.

Common questions and topics

If you adopt, the adoption issue will always be a part of your life. You're going to face it whenever your child asks you a question about her birthmother or birthfather, whenever a stranger feels compelled to speculate about why your child doesn't share your race, and whenever the anniversary of the placement day rolls around and you get teary-eyed from remembering what it felt like to behold your child for the first time.



One of your jobs as an adoptive parent is to help your child understand adoption in general and her adoption in particular in such a way that she's comfortable with her history and confident of her place in her family and in the world. Here are some ways you can accomplish this goal:

- ✓ Share your child's adoption story with her in a positive way and from the very beginning. You want her first encounter with word *adoption* to be a positive one, and you want her adoption story to be one that she enjoys hearing.
- ✓ Answer your child's questions honestly and in an age-appropriate way and don't interpret curiosity or longing for the birthmother (which is common to children who've been adopted) to be a rejection of you. You're the one she looks to make her feel safe. When your child is old enough and if she expresses an interest in finding her birthparents, help her. Who better than you to help her deal with the feelings and emotions that a birthparent search can bring to the surface?
- ✓ If you've adopted an older child, first realize that your child may not feel the same way about the adoption that you do — and may even resent you for it. That's normal. But regardless of your child's feelings, your commitment shouldn't waiver.
- ✓ Respond to other folks' inappropriate comments or questions in such a way that your child comes away from the encounter feeling okay. You'll be surprised at the stupid and thoughtless things people say — often with the best intentions — and heartbroken that these comments have the power to hurt your child. Chapter 17 has suggestions for what you can do when people say thoughtless things.

You're going to encounter a bunch of other situations and issues that are unique to adoptive families (Part IV is devoted to just such topics). These situations will challenge you, exasperate you, warm your heart, and — no

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kidding — sometimes make you laugh out loud. Through all of it, remember that you have a special role in your child's life, a role that is yours and yours alone: Mom or Dad.

Your Child and You

So many children are already available for adoption, and so many other children are going to be born to women who aren't prepared to parent them. What this means is that there is no shortage of adoptable children — not in the United States and not in the world. In fact, there are more children available than there are adoptive homes for them. There are babies and toddlers and preteens and teens. There are healthy children and children with medical issues. There are singles and sibling groups. There are children born in the United States and children born elsewhere. There are children of every race and every ethnicity. If you're adopting, your child is somewhere in this mix.

So the question isn't so much "Where are the children?" They're everywhere. The question is "What child do you want to parent?" Finding the answer for this question can be hard, mainly because saying that you're open to a particular type of child feels like you're rejecting all the other children.

But, hard or not, this is one question you can't dodge. At some point in the adoption process, you're going to have to actually state your preference — about age, about race, about challenges or special situations, about whatever — to another person. And you must be honest, for your sake and for your child's. Head to Chapter 8 for the details on describing the child you want to adopt.



The best thing we have ever done

Before we became involved in our adoption efforts, we used to think that adoption was something extraordinarily expensive that only rich people could afford. But that was really not the case. You don't necessarily have to go someplace like China or Russia to adopt a child. There are children right here in the United States who need families, too. Once you hold that little child in your arms for the first time, you won't care at all if it's a boy or a girl, or what color his or her skin happens to be.

We also used to think that it would be difficult raising "someone else's child," but these two boys we have adopted are not someone else's children. They are *our* children. We can honestly say, without any doubt, that we love them just as much as we love our older biological child. Adoption has definitely been the best thing we have ever done.

Jon and Jennifer Kirkman

When you're done answering the question "What kind of child do I want?" then you need to ask yourself a follow-up question: "What kind of parent does that child deserve?"

Obviously, all children deserve good parents. Forthright. Honest. Loving. Gentle. Consistent. Stable. Committed. As an adoptive parent, however, you have to add another descriptor to that list: fearless.



You may not have brought your child into the world, but you have to help him navigate his way through it: through the ignorance of people who assume that, because he doesn't look like you, he can't be yours. Through the presumption of those who think that, because she doesn't do laps in the same gene pool as your forebears, her tie to you is somehow diminished. Through the questions that rankle (Is she your own?) to the compliments that chafe (He's so lucky that you took him from that place!), you must be a fearless advocate for the integrity of your child and your family.

In a world that too often defines who belongs together by things like race or genes or culture, your family is a testament to the fact that some people aren't bound by those limitations. When all is said and done, the person this will matter the most to is your child, your very own child, the one who, someday, will walk fearlessly through the same world on his own.

Questions to Ask Yourself

We suppose that having an entire book devoted to the topic of adoption implies that adoption is pretty difficult. Lots of stuff you need to know. Even more stuff you need to do. And all sorts of things to watch out for and be prepared to handle. The process itself *is* pretty formidable. But when it comes to deciding whether adoption is right for *you*, it's really pretty simple. Ask yourself these questions:

- ✔ **Why do I want a child?** You can come up with a lot of good answers to this question. One of the best — and the one you'll hear most often from most people — is also the simplest: I want to be a parent.
- ✔ **Am I ready to love a child who I didn't give birth to?** If you want to adopt, the *only* answer to this question is a resounding *yes!*
- ✔ **Am I ready to commit to a child "until death do us part"?** You can disown your parents. You can divorce your spouse. But your child will be your child forever. You can no more toss away a child you adopt than you can toss away a child you give birth to. If you think differently, get goldfish instead. They, unlike children, can survive quite nicely being accessories in your life.

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Part I: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Adoption

✓ **Am I prepared to discuss adoption openly and honestly with my child?** All people have a right to their personal history. Your child has a right to hers. How you discuss it has a lot to do with how your child feels about herself and her place in the family. So the answer here is, Yes, I'm prepared. If you're not (or need advice on how to discuss the adoption positively), head to Chapter 16.

The preceding questions are the nutshell questions: the most important indicators of whether adoption is right for you. And if it is, you better get hoppin'. Somewhere out there, your child — born or unborn — is waiting for you.