

The Adoption Process

Adoption is a legal process through which parents take on the responsibility of raising a child who was not born to them. Some people adopt because they cannot have children of their own. Others who have biological children may decide to adopt more. Single people who wish to become parents also sometimes adopt a child.

Children may be placed for adoption for a variety of reasons. They may have only one parent, who is unable to look after them. Some biological parents feel that adoptive parents will be better able to care for the child's needs.

Most children available for adoption are not babies. Many are school-age. Some have siblings from whom they do not want to be separated. Others may have physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. Some children waiting for adoption are orphans from other countries. People who wish to adopt a baby, especially one with specific characteristics, may have to wait a long time or may never be able to adopt.

ADOPTION AGENCIES

Adoption agencies handle the majority of adoptions. These agencies are operated or licensed by the states. They employ professionals trained to handle the emotional and legal issues involved in adoptions.

When biological parents consider placing their child for adoption, an agency can provide information and counseling, and may arrange for prenatal care. Biological parents must be willing to permanently end their legal rights to the child for an adoption to take place. Counseling helps minimize the chance that biological parents will change their minds at the last minute.

Agencies carefully screen applicants who want to adopt a child. This process, typically called a *home study*, seeks to make sure that the applicants

will be responsible parents. The home study considers such factors as age, financial situation, flexibility, adaptability, and parenting skills.

Adoption agencies do not have to follow a particular format when conducting home studies. They must follow general state regulations, but they can develop their own policies and procedures. Some agencies encourage adoptive parents to attend group orientation meetings or training classes. Others start by having a social worker meet with family members.

The home study process may take six months or longer, but it varies from state to state and from agency to agency. After meeting with the prospective family several times, the social worker prepares a written report. At least one meeting takes place in the home of the adoptive family.

Adoption agencies in different locations are often linked through networks to better match available children with adoptive parents. Some agencies handle international adoptions. This requires in-depth knowledge of the laws of both countries involved.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTIONS

Many couples and singles choose to adopt children from other countries. The number of international adoptions has risen over the years. Adopting internationally has both advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- There are many children available for adoption from a variety of countries.

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- While the costs of international adoptions vary, most adoption agencies can give prospective parents a list of all the fees before they begin the process.
- Once a home study has been conducted and the parents have been approved, they will normally have a child within 12 to 18 months.

Disadvantages

- Parents will probably have to travel at least once to another country. This can create problems with work schedules and finances.
- The infants available for international adoption are normally under one year of age, but are not newborns.
- The medical history of the child’s biological family may be unknown.
- Much paperwork is involved.

There are some steps that prospective parents can take to make international adoptions easier:

1. **Find an experienced adoption agency.** Work with a reputable adoption agency that has an established program in the country where the child was born.
2. **Develop a system.** The adoption process, even in this country, involves a great deal of

paperwork. When adopting from another country, that paperwork can more than double. It is important to have an organized system for filing important documents. Lost or misfiled paperwork can cause delays in the process.

3. **Be patient.** There are certain aspects of the adoption process that are out of the prospective parents’ control. Although they may have completed their part of the process on time, the government agencies involved must complete their parts as well. This can take more time than expected.

PRIVATE ADOPTIONS

Some adoptions are arranged without the help of an adoption agency. In these private adoptions, a third party—such as a lawyer, doctor, or religious leader—makes the arrangements. The adopting family may cover the expenses of prenatal care and birth for the biological mother.

The adoption process may take months, even years, to complete. The end result of a successful adoption is a new family, which can bring joy and love to parents and children.

Taking Action

Imagine that a friend is considering adopting a child and is nervous about the home study. Conduct research to find out more information on how a home study might be conducted and what information the agency collects through the home study process. Write a one-page report to share what you find.

Rewarding Good Behavior

One way that parents and caregivers can guide young children toward good behavior is by recognizing and rewarding that behavior. Hugging, winking, patting the child’s head, and giving praise are excellent rewards. They give the child the benefits of attention, physical contact, and love.

TYPES OF REWARDS

In certain instances, parents and other caregivers may want to offer other types of rewards. Three general types of rewards include things, activities, and social approval. Consider a child’s age, interests, and personality when choosing appropriate rewards.

Most children love being able to select an item from a treasure chest—a small toy, jewelry, stickers, or pretty shells. A physical reward also might include the use of something the child really likes, such as the computer, the piano, or the caregiver’s cap or sunglasses. It is usually best not to use food as a reward.

Activities that can be used as rewards might include playing with a special game or toy, listening to a story with headphones, or going to a movie or on another special outing.

Social rewards give a child the chance for others to recognize achievements. Workers at a child care center might highlight one child each week as “student of the week” and display that child’s photo. Other rewards including sending a note home about the child’s accomplishment or giving the child a special responsibility, such as passing out treats or choosing the game that the group will play.

USING REWARDS

It is important to choose when to use rewards and to use them wisely. If rewards are too frequent, they become an expectation, rather than something special.

When giving rewards, make sure that the child clearly links the reward to the desired behavior. Teachers and parents should try to reward children while the child remembers the good behavior, whether it was sitting quietly and paying attention while a story is read or feeding the parrot.

Sometimes a child’s inappropriate behavior becomes the norm. In such situations, caregivers and parents may choose to use a structured system of rewarding improvement. Two reward systems are commonly used for this purpose, the Happy Face chart and collecting chips. Both can be used over a period of time to help children who have had difficulty improving their behavior in one area. They can also be used to reward partial improvement over shorter periods to encourage additional improvement. For example, a child who dawdles in the morning can be rewarded for getting up on time, and later for making his or her bed.

The Happy Face Chart

This type of system works especially well for reinforcing prompt and cooperative completion of a particular daily activity. To make a Happy Face chart, draw five squares to represent five days on a large piece of paper. Explain that every time the child does the desired action the first time he or she is told, the child earns a

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happy-face sticker in one of the squares. (A happy face may also be drawn in the square.) Once all five squares are filled with happy faces, the child earns a reward. Several steps help make this system work:

- Remind the child of what the reward is by drawing a picture of it or writing what it is on the chart.
- Display the chart so the child can monitor his or her progress.
- Use praise every time the child behaves as desired. Making a big show out of adding the happy face to the chart is good reinforcement. Allowing the child to place the sticker on the chart is even better.
- Avoid scolding the child if he fails to behave as desired—especially at the beginning. Simply point out, for example, that if he had put the toys away, a happy face could have been awarded.
- Display the completed chart for a few days and encourage others to congratulate the child.

COLLECTING CHIPS

Using the chip system to modify behavior involves positive *and* negative reinforcement. In this system, children earn points for behaviors that are desired—and lose them when they misbehave. It works well for situations that may occur multiple times a day. Certain positive behaviors allow a child to earn points (represented by chips). Specific negative behaviors cause chips to be taken away.

To keep track of points, game chips, caps from milk jugs, or squares of colored cardboard can serve as chips. A decorated container gives the child a place to store earned points.

Before putting the system in practice, parents or caregivers need to decide which behaviors win points and which ones lose points. Positive behaviors might include setting the table or saying *please* and *thank-you*. Arguing, interrupting, or yelling indoors might lose points.

Finally, the caregiver and child need to determine what the points can be used for. What rewards will the child receive in exchange for accumulating a specific number of points?

Guidelines for success with this system include:

- Avoid giving the child points in an offhand way. Get the child’s attention, clearly explaining what behavior earned the points, offer praise, and give the child the plastic chip or paper square.
- Avoid making the situation overly negative when the child has to lose points. Speak calmly. Remind the child what was done wrong and what the agreement was about that behavior.
- If a child runs out of chips, offer the chance to earn extra points by doing some chores or helping out in some other way. That puts the child back in the system.

Taking Action

Explain how you would put one of these systems in place in a child care setting. What behaviors would gain positive reinforcement? Which would you try to discourage? What rewards would you give? How often would you use rewards?