



UTAH GUIDE TO **ADOPTING CHILDREN**

WHO LIVE IN FOSTER CARE
A Handbook for Prospective Adoptive Parents

utah department of
human services
Child and Family Services

UTAH GUIDE TO ADOPTING CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN FOSTER CARE

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Introduction

On any given day in the state of Utah, approximately 2,500 children are in state custody because their primary caretakers are currently unable to care for them. On average, 45 percent of those children will not be able to safely return home, and they will need another permanent family to love and care for them. These children need a nurturing adoptive family in which to grow.

Over the past several years, many people have been working on developing public and private partnerships on behalf of Utah's children and families to help address the needs of these children. Two major needs have been identified. The first and foremost is the need to find more families to permanently care for these children. Secondly, is that adoptive families are going to need the ongoing support of the entire community as they take on the challenges of parenting these children -- many of whom have experienced far more pain, loss and suffering in their short lives than any child should ever have to endure.

There is **no cost to adopting** children who live in foster care. Both single parents and married couples have been successful in these kinds of adoptions. Both younger families with children and older couples with experience in raising children have had successful adoption experiences. The key to a successful experience is knowing your strengths and limitations as an adopting family and assuring that the child or children placed with you can succeed within your family.

If you are interested, you may begin the step for the adoption process. First, you will attend classes to better understand adoption issues and initiate an evaluation of your interests, desires and abilities in parenting one or more children.

When you are approved as an adoptive family in Utah, you are also issued a foster care license, since Child and Family Services applies the same standards to adoptive families as it does to foster families. Once the training and evaluation are completed, your careful consideration of children in need of an adoptive family may begin. The Division of Child and Family Services (referred to as Child and Family Services or DCFS) will work with you to place the child or children that you feel are most appropriate for your family.

You may wish to only adopt, and not provide foster care. Providing foster care to a child is not a prerequisite to adopting; however, approximately 50 percent of the adoptions of children in state custody are by their foster parents. We understand how difficult it is to provide a temporary home. Yet, it is necessary to understand, when considering fostering or adopting, that all the adults in the life of a child belong to that child, in one way or another, throughout their life. When a child is adopted, it is important that he or she feels connected to his or her past, present and future.

Also, in a very real sense, when you adopt a child you are adopting that child's biological family as your extended family. If the child is of a different race or culture than yours, it is important that you help to maintain your child's cultural identity by preserving and respecting the child's culture. By adopting that child, you are also choosing to make that culture an integral part of your family life.

Once a child is placed in your home for adoption we would invite you into an ongoing partnership with other adopting families and the supporting public and private agencies. We know this support is important to you and your child to assure the adoption experience is successful.

What is Adoption?

Adoption is a legally recognized relationship between a parent and a child when the child is not born to the parent. Through adoption you become legally and morally responsible for the child's safety, well-being, education, health care, values and life skills development, as well as the day-to-day care of the child. When a child is adopted, the adopting parents will meet the emotional, physical, spiritual and developmental needs of the child.

Today, many children are parented by a single parent, a grandparent, a stepparent, a foster parent or another parental figure at some time in their lives. They are experiencing multiple sets of parents or grandparents and extended family members in parental roles. Children who are adopted always have at least two sets of parents: birth parents and adoptive parents. For these children to be able to understand who they are, it is important for them to come to know, at some level, each of the parents who have had a part in creating the life they are living. All children try to make sense of these complex relationships. The more they know about the people to whom they have had any type of parental tie, the more successful they will be at developing a more complete picture of themselves.

There are many children who need an adoptive family. Most are older children, children who have siblings with whom they need to be adopted, or children who have special needs. Some reside in other communities and states, but many are waiting in your own community or region. Many of these children face emotional, educational and/or physical challenges.

What they all have in common is the need for a person to step forward and accept the responsibilities and commitment to take care of them until adulthood and beyond; to offer them a caring family that is prepared to address their unique needs.

Dr. Vera Fahlberg, a child and family expert and author, divides parenting roles into three categories:

Biological Parent – This parent gives life to a child. This determines the child's sex, eye color, hair color and texture, intellectual potential, temperament, potential talents as well as some medical conditions. Racial and ethnic heritage is determined by biology.

Legal Parent – This parent makes all the important decisions for the child. For instance, where the child will live, what school to attend, what medical care is given, etc. This parent is financially and legally responsible for the child's actions.

Parenting Parent – This parent provides the day-to-day care of the child. This parent is responsible for providing love and guidance. This parent models behavior for the child to copy. This person cooks meals,

washes clothes, helps with school work, takes care of the ill child, watches the ball games, etc. This is the primary educator who teaches values, religion and life skills.

People become legal members of a family by birth, marriage or adoption. Government and societies have developed ways to recognize the great importance and permanence of such deep, emotional commitments. Laws, regulations and practices have been developed to give persons related by adoption and marriage comparable rights and responsibilities as those related by birth. All families, whether formed by birth, adoption or marriage, are expected by our society to be permanent connections to love, acceptance and support by all members throughout their lives.

Through the Eyes of the Child

If we do not understand adoption “through the eyes of the child,” we do not fully understand adoption. Even if adoption is a positive experience for a child, filled with love, security and acceptance, it was “loss” that led to the adoption. The fact that a child has come to be adopted means that something unpleasant has already happened in that child’s life. By the time an adoption occurs, loss and grief have touched each child’s life. Even for infant adoptions, the nature of the mother-child relationship and the bond that has formed through nine months of pregnancy is important. The adult concept that a biological parent loved a child so much that they made an adoption plan for their child often makes little sense to a child. Children who may have been abused or neglected by their parents also may remember many instances of feeling safe and loved by them. A child’s understanding of why they came to adoption is usually very different from those held by the adoptive parents and other adults in their lives. There is always a need for adopting parents to understand and honor the adopted child’s biological parents and their heritage.

If, through the eyes of the child, it seems they were “kidnapped” from their biological family, and the legal/nurturing parent only thinks of adoption as a “happy” or “good” thing, the child may feel very alone in their legal family. It is essential that an adoptive parent, as the legal and care-giving parent, sees the value of the biological parent as the child sees it. How does one show respect toward someone who has allegedly abused a child or someone who has possibly made some poor life choices? Taking the time to find out the “strengths” and “good points” of your adopted child’s biological relatives and honoring them for those things will assist you in strengthening those in this child and honoring the full range of this child’s inherited attributes and talents. For example, your family may not be musical or athletic. Yet, your adopted child may bring great strengths in those areas to your family. By demonstrating positive regard for their biological family, you show the ultimate respect to your adopted child.

The grief and loss a child feels at adoption should not be viewed or treated as abnormal. These are a normal part of the adoption transition for a child. These losses may be manifest in a number of behaviors in the adopted child throughout his or her life. It is much like a biological parent who has lost a child. Life’s events will mark points of loss and ongoing grief. We need to understand this ongoing loss, and honor and support children through these difficult periods.

Child and Family Services holds the value that all children need and are entitled to enduring relationships that provide a family, stability, belonging and a sense of self that connects children to their past, present and future.

The Application and Home Study

The State of Utah has a unified application and family evaluation process for adoption and foster care. The family evaluation is commonly called a home study. Interested families may contact Utah Foster Care (a private non-profit agency) for information on becoming a foster and/or adoptive parent in Utah. Staff members from Utah Foster Care will meet with families to familiarize them with the foster care and adoption process. All new families who meet the basic qualifications will be invited to complete 24 hours of foster/adoption training that is a combination of classroom and on-line training offered by Utah Foster Care. You will be given information on the training classes that are offered in your area as well as an application to become licensed. Attendance at the classes is mandatory. These classes receive high praise by foster/adoptive families who report, "Any parent would benefit from attending these classes."

During the foster/adoption training you will receive assistance in completing your licensing paperwork. You will be asked to complete an initial application, which will include some basic information as well as approval for the state to conduct criminal and child abuse background checks for all adults living in your home. If there is a history that includes convictions of felony offenses or child abuse, your application may be denied. Also, current state law requires that a couple be legally married and not co-habiting.

In Utah you will also need:

- Four letters of reference from people who know your ability to parent.
- Medical reports from your physician.
- Social history information questionnaire.

You will turn in your completed application materials to the Office of Licensing.

During the course of training, you will be given other parts of the application that are required to become licensed, such as the Provider Code of Conduct, Office of Licensing Rules, Confidentiality form, and Emergency Plan. Next, you will be ready to have your home study conducted.

The home study process provides an opportunity to look at yourself and your support system, and to explore beliefs, attitudes, opinions, self-image, goals, achievements and coping skills. It will be a time for your whole family to examine your readiness to adopt and the special gifts you have to offer an adopted child. It will also be a time for you to learn more about the types of children needing an adoptive family and the joys and challenges of adoptive parenting.

A worker from the Office of Licensing, from Child and Family Services or from a private contract adoption agency will visit your home and interview all members of your family to conduct the home study.

Once the home study is complete, a licenser will approve or deny your home for foster care. If approved, you will be issued a license which addresses the safety of your house. Then a regional Child and Family Services committee made up of foster care and adoption staff will approve or deny your family for the placement of children who need family care through foster or adoption.

After the Home Study

The period of time after the approval and prior to placement of a child can be a difficult time. It is, in a way, like being “engaged” to a child about whom you know nothing, with no real target date for the “wedding.”

Using this time to advance your learning regarding adoption-related issues can help. Utah’s Adoption Connection website www.utahadopt.org has information on a variety of topics, as well as a lending library where books can be checked out at no charge. An excellent source of support includes other adoptive families. They can share their experiences and how they coped during the waiting period. There are support groups in every part of the state. Utah’s Adoption Connection website maintains a current list of support groups so you can locate one in your area and begin to acquaint yourself with other adoptive parents.

During this time, Child and Family Services will be reviewing children in need of an adoptive family that might be a good match with your family. Most of these children are older or part of a sibling group. If you are wishing to adopt a younger child, foster parents who are caring for children who cannot safely return to their parents, will be considered for adopting the children in their care.

You may lessen your stress by actively searching for and screening children through The Adoption Exchange internet listings, adoption events and other available resources. It may be helpful to check with your worker from time to time to obtain information on the number of children being placed in the ages and profiles you are considering adopting.

The Selection Process

Using information from your foster/adoption classes, books you have read and advice from other adoptive parents and your agency worker, you will be better prepared to make a good and realistic decision as to the child you might adopt. You will have considered many of the characteristics of a child you feel would fit into your family.

When adopting a child through the state of Utah, it is important to remember the agency is seeking a family for a child and not a child for a particular family. This can create frustration for some families when they find a particular child they have an interest in but the state selects another family for that child. Remember, this is not a rejection of your family, but a decision that is based on the best match for the child.

If the child is Native American, the Indian Child Welfare Act requires preference for the child's placement be given to a member of the child's extended family, families from the child's tribal band or other Native American families.

State law requires that for the first 120 days after the court shelter hearing when the child came into Child and Family Services custody, relatives of the child will be given preference for his or her placement.

Many families choose to be foster-to-adopt families for the purpose of making adoption decisions earlier in the placement process. Choosing to be a foster-to-adopt family requires an understanding that until a child has a goal of adoption or becomes legally free for adoption, the foster parent is an important team member helping to facilitate the return of the child to the birth family. Foster parents may play an important role in mentoring birth parents while they are working to have their children returned to them.

Child and Family Services' rules require that, when considering families for the placement of a child, at least three families be reviewed, if available. Thus, when you are considered for a child, generally at least two other families will also be under consideration and could be selected. If you are not the family selected, this is not a rejection of you, nor is it an indication of your capabilities of caring for a child. There simply can only be one family selected from the three or more considered.

You may be considered for a number of children before the right match is made for your family. This requires patience on your part.

When you have been selected as a possible placement for a specific child, your worker will present to you all of the information Child and Family Services has about the child. While the agency is required to provide the information it has, it is ultimately up to you to make sure that you understand as much as possible about the child. Ask all the questions you have to assure you are making an appropriate lifelong decision for your family. Your adoption is a life-long decision.

After you have been selected as the foster-to-adopt or adoptive family, take a few days to make certain the decision is the right one. Jitters are normal; however, if your feelings go beyond jitters to the "something's not right" category, take more time and/or get more information. If you do not believe that a particular child is a good fit for your family, do not proceed with the placement. Instead, use this experience to further define for yourself and your agency worker what type of child would be a better fit. This decision will demonstrate your desire to do the right thing for the child or children to be adopted and for your current family.

Pre-Placement and Placement Activities

You will always have the final decision on whether a particular child is the right one for placement in your home. Utah law and rules require full disclosure to you of all of the information the state has about the child's background. This information may be limited but includes what the state has about medical, educational and psychological information. A worker should go through the record with you and share with

you all information relevant to parenting the child. Child and Family Services cannot release third party reports, such as from doctors and psychologists, but can help you obtain that information from these professionals. Take as much time as you like and ask as many questions as you need to be sure you have all the available information about the child.

If you determine you could commit to a child, pre-placement visits may be arranged. There is no rule about how many or how long these visits should be. You, your worker, and the child's current caregiver should work out a plan that minimizes disruption and stress to the child and will work for your family. A transition plan helps the child make the transition from a current foster family or biological family to your family. This may also include activities related to the child's biological family, where the child is helped emotionally to make the change to your home.

You may find, as you become committed to a particular child, that commitment is not always the same as loving that child. Even parents who have biological children often report that they learned that they were first committed to the birth child, then learned to love them. Love, in adoption, becomes a decision to follow principles of commitment, caring, sharing and service. Learning how this worked for other adopting families can help you work through the process of growing together as a family.

If you have other children, it is important to understand their feelings about adding another family member. You will want to help each of them express their feelings about the adoption and help each of them with the adjustments they need.

The first days and weeks after a child is placed into your home requires focused time and energy on getting to know each other and getting off on the "right foot." You may want to work closely with your worker to plan time and activities to assist in the initial adjustment.

Post-Placement Services

After your new child arrives, you will encounter some experiences familiar to most adopting families. At first, there may be a "honeymoon" period of several weeks, followed by some testing of your resolve to really show a commitment to the child as a part of your family. Educating yourself about adoption issues can help you understand emotional dynamics that you may want to anticipate and think about. A Child and Family Services worker will visit with you regarding the adjustment of your family and the child and to provide support.

Depending on the history of the child and previous trauma and losses, there will be a period of adjustment as the child comes to really understand that they are now a part of your family and will remain so. Testing behavior may come at different times as the child goes through different emotional adjustments to your family. You may have already experienced similar testing behavior with other children in your home or other children you know. Make use of the experiences of other adoptive or foster families you have met, especially how they resolved challenges similar to the ones you experience with your adopted child.

Determine what ongoing supports and services you will need with your child and assure those are in place. Remember support groups, current adoption resources and the lending library on many relevant topics on Utah's Adoption Connection website at www.utahadopt.org.

If your child qualifies for adoption assistance such as Medicaid or financial subsidy, you can work on that application with your worker. If there is a need and your child qualifies, make sure that a written "Adoption Assistance Agreement" is in place prior to the finalization of your adoption.

State and Federal Adoption Assistance

State and Federal Adoption Assistance funds have been made available to help support the placement of children who otherwise may not be adopted. A child must meet the definition of a "child with special needs" in order to receive adoption assistance. Special needs is defined for this purpose as:

1. A child who is 5 years old or older,
2. A member of a sibling group placed together for adoption, or
3. A child under 18 years of age with a physical, cognitive or mental disability, or
 - a. is under 5 years old and is at risk to develop such based due to specific factors identified in the child's or biological parent's health or social histories.

Prior to finalization of your adoption, your Child and Family Services worker will provide you with information on available Federal and State Adoption Assistance and determine with you if your child qualifies. Utah's Adoption Connection website outlines details about the adoption assistance services. If the child qualifies for adoption assistance, you may be able to obtain the following on behalf of the child:

1. Nonrecurring expenses for the legal finalization of the adoption that are not paid for through other sources may be reimbursed up to \$2,000 per child.
2. Utah Medicaid coverage. This will be available to supplement your private insurance in providing needed medical and mental health services for the child
3. A monthly financial subsidy to assist with basic and special needs for the child until the child reaches 18 years of age. The rate is negotiated with Child and Family Services and the adoptive family to provide for the child. The rate can never exceed the foster care payment.
4. Supplemental adoption funding may be available to assist with extraordinary, infrequent or uncommon documented needs not covered by Medicaid, monthly subsidy or other sources.

Note: It is imperative that your Adoption Assistance Agreement be signed prior to the finalization of your adoption.

Finalizing the Adoption

In Utah, an adoption can be legally finalized in court after the child has been in the home six months. The time a child has been fostered in the home counts towards that six-month period.

You will need to contact an attorney to assist with the court filing for legal finalization of the adoption. Resources are available to help with the adoption related costs, include: Federal Adoption Assistance funding, tax credits and employee adoption benefits, for companies with such.

Developing Ongoing Support

Developing Your Support Network

When adopting a child with special needs, families do best when they utilize a variety of family, private and community resources to assist with rearing the child. Extended family, support groups, counseling, respite care, medical services, educational resources, special day camps and a variety of other community services may be available to help meet any ongoing or new needs you may identify. During your foster/adoption training, involvement with support groups and experience as a foster parent, you will learn about many resources available in your area. Also, there is a Child and Family Services post-adoption worker in every region of the state. These professionals can be a great resource for you and can inform you about other resources available in your area.

If your adopted child is of a different race or ethnic culture, it is very important to connect with the community of your child's race and become a part of that community's activities. This will help to honor your child's heritage and facilitate contact with that community.

You will continue to be the best advocate for your child's needs. Maintaining contact with supports for yourself and the child will help you feel more secure in your parenting role. Think of the connections to support groups as an "insurance policy" that is there in case you need it in the future.

Child and Family Services, The Adoption Exchange, Utah Foster Care and local adoptive parent support groups provide ongoing classes and other adoption related educational and support activities.

Crisis Management

If an issue arises that places you or your adopted child into a crisis situation, support systems are in place to assist you. A post adoption worker can help connect you to the needed supports to help you deal with specific problems, respite care or other needed interventions. Your insurance and Medicaid services can help purchase needed medical or mental health services. Get help for any developing problems early, rather than waiting until you are "at the end of your rope."

You can find post-adoption resources at Utah’s Adoption Connection website at www.utahadopt.org or information by calling 801-265-0444 weekdays between 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m..

Useful Websites

Utah’s Adoption Connection: www.utahadopt.org

This website, created on behalf of Utah’s waiting children, is designed to connect families and children who wait to form loving permanent families. This site was developed and is being managed by The Adoption Exchange through a contract with the Utah Department of Human Services, Child and Family Services.

The goals of this website are to:

- Decrease the time children must wait in foster care for a permanent family.
- Increase availability of post-adoption resources.
- Connect families who have adopted with available community resources.

The Adoption Exchange: www.adoptex.org

A nonprofit organization whose purpose is to make the connections between families who adopt and children who wait for a safe and loving family to care for them. General information about adoption. Photo listing of waiting children and waiting families. Local and webinar trainings are available through the web site.

Utah Foster Care: www.utahfostercare.org

This nonprofit organization was established in 1999 to work as a partner with the State of Utah by recruiting, educating and nurturing foster and adoptive families. All training for Utah licensed foster and adoptive parents is done by the Foundation.

AdoptUSKids: <https://www.adoptuskids.org>

Educates families about foster care and adoption and gives child welfare professionals information and support to help them improve their services. We also maintain the nation’s only federally funded photolisting service that connects waiting children with families.

Adoptive Families: <https://www.adoptivefamilies.com>

Adoptive Families is an award-winning resource for parents-to-be navigating the adoption process and for parents raising children through adoption. Founded as a black-and-white newsletter, OURS, in 1968, by Adoptive Families of America, Adoptive Families took its current name and switched to four-color publication in 1994. In 2014, Adoptive Families transformed into an all-digital magazine and relaunched adoptivefamilies.com as a comprehensive searchable website containing the many resources from more than 40 years of publication.

Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov/adoption

A comprehensive resource on all aspects of adoption. This is a service of the Children’s Bureau,

Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services.

Spaulding for Children: <https://spaulding.org>

A private, non-profit child welfare agency, was established in 1968 when several entities, each seeking a way to make life better for children without families, joined together. Spaulding for Children finds permanent homes for children that are in the public child welfare system and supports families in maintaining their children safely in their homes. It was one of the first agencies in the country that specialized in finding and training adoptive families for the placement of children with disabilities and other challenges.

North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC): www.nacac.org

Founded in 1974 by adoptive parents, NACAC is committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and families who adopt them. A great resource for adoption triad members.