

family ties

The nuts and bolts — and life-changing joys — of adoption



By Elizabeth Foy Larsen

Source for statistic: National Council for Adoption

After learning that they'd need in-vitro fertilization to get pregnant, Jenna and Trevor Henderson decided they would build their family another way. "I had always thought about adoption, and we had even talked about it when we were dating," Jenna says.

Six months after starting the process with an adoption agency, the couple was out hiking when their cell phone rang through the spotty reception: It was their social worker calling to tell them that a baby boy had been born, and his mother wanted to set up an adoption for him. Would they be interested? Within moments, Jenna and Trevor were crying as photos of the boy they would name Theo appeared on their phone. "We saw his face and we knew he was supposed to be our baby," says Jenna.

Not all adoptions are the result of infertility. "I felt there were these kids out there who needed families," says Annie Gillette Cleveland, a Minneapolis mom whose two sons, now 13 and 11 were adopted from Colombia when they were each 3 years old. "That pulled at my heart more than the idea of having a child who looked like me."

The adoption process can require a lot from prospective parents: They have to make different kinds of decisions than do couples giving birth, plus complete stacks of paperwork and often spend tens of thousands of dollars. They also have to keep tabs on the constantly evolving adoption world. "Adoption in America is transforming before our eyes," says Adam Pertman, the executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and the author of *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming our Families—and America*. "Formal adoption has moved from being primarily about white infants born to unwed mothers being adopted by white parents to being a process where children—many of whom are older, are of color, or have special needs—are being raised by single parents, gay parents, older parents, and the whole range of diverse types of families."

Sorting through your options can feel overwhelming, but any adoptive parent will tell you it's worth it. "The adoption process can get a little complicated," says Jenna. "It all becomes worthwhile the second you hold your baby in your arms." If adoption may be in your family's future, here's what you need to know about the three major types of adoption in the U.S.

Domestic Infant Adoption: Moving toward openness

▶ **22,000**

Average number of infants adopted each year in the U.S., not counting foster and relative adoptions

BACKGROUND: Pregnant mothers and fathers who decide not to parent their children usually contact an adoption agency or private adoption attorney to make an adoption plan. Parents choose their child's adoptive parents through a process in which the prospective adoptive parents put together a packet of information about themselves (without names and other identifying details) that they give to the agency.

AVERAGE COST: Ranges from \$25,000 to \$35,000. Costs include attorney fees, travel, home study fees, medical costs for the birthmother, and some expenses for the birthmother, depending on state laws.

AVERAGE WAIT TIME: Depends on the adoption, but the process can go quickly. In an *Adoptive Fam-*



▲ The Clevelands adopted their sons from Colombia when they were each 3.



▲ Theo was born in Florida, then adopted by the Hendersons in California.

lies magazine survey, the majority of respondents were matched with a birthmother in less than 24 months. People younger than 25 or older than 45 may have to wait longer.

REQUIREMENTS: There are no legal requirements in most states, although most require a home study, which is an evaluation done by an agency social worker. It involves background checks, interviews, and references to determine that you're able to raise a child.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: Domestic adoptions in the U.S. are moving toward some form of "openness," meaning that adoptive families and birthfamilies share information with one another. Children's Home Society & Family Services of Minnesota, which works with parents in several states and is one of the leading adoption agencies in the country, says that most of their birthfamilies and adoptive families exchange names and addresses. Some information-sharing extends to biological grandparents as well.

While the prospect of having contact with your child's birthfamily may sound daunting, over 20 years of research at the University of Minnesota and the University of Texas at Austin has shown that open adoptions are in the best interest of the adoptee, and benefit the adoptive family and the birthfamily as well. "Open adoption is not co-parenting," says Pertman. "In fact, greater honesty and connections in adoption generally serve the interests of everyone concerned better than the way it used to be."

For the Hendersons, openness means that they send letters and photos of their son to their adoption agency, which makes them available to his birthmother. "She's a part of his story and we often think of how grateful we are to her for letting Theo be in our lives," says Jenna. As a parent, you want to love and help your children through life as best as you can. As an adoptive parent, that feeling for me is magnified because it's also about

his birthmother, who trusted us to raise her child when she didn't feel she could. We feel it's important to be open with Theo about his birthmother, and we hope he'll understand and make peace with the reasons why she chose adoption. We hope he knows that she made this decision because she also loves him very much."

International Adoption: Rules and regulations change quickly

▶ **11,058**

Number of children adopted from abroad by American parents in 2010

BACKGROUND: International adoption began in 1956, when American families began adopting South Korean children after the Korean War. Today, countries with active adoption programs include Ethiopia, Haiti, Russia, Uganda, Colombia, South Korea, and China. The number of international adoptions has declined significantly (from the high of nearly 23,000 in 2004), in part because some nations have slowed down or closed their programs, says Susan Soonkeum Cox, vice president of policy and external affairs for Holt International, the Eugene, Oregon-based adoption agency that started international adoption. While some get shut down because of government corruption or unethical practices, other countries—including South Korea and China—became economically strong enough to be able to afford to care for their children and start phasing out international adoption.

AVERAGE COST: Between \$20,000 and \$40,000, which includes fees for the home study, dossier preparation, travel, and adoption agency. There are also in-country payments, which might include salaries for caregivers and translators, and some agencies also require a charitable donation to help children in the sending country.

AVERAGE WAIT TIME: Varies widely, and can change at any time. An adoption from China is estimated to take at least four to five years, fewer if you're open to adopting a child older than 5 or a child with a special need. On the other end of the spectrum, wait times for Ethiopia can range between three and 22 months.



▶ The DeGraws traveled to Ethiopia to bring baby Miles home.

REQUIREMENTS: Depends on the country. Colombia, for example, mandates that parents be married for at least three years at the time of their adoption application, have no more than one divorce between them, and no history of a physical or mental health diagnosis. Most international adoption programs require parents to travel to their child's birth country at least once, sometimes more.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: "It's important to think seriously about whether you have the capacity to love a child who is of a different race and culture," says Cox, who herself was adopted from South Korea. "Understanding race and identity will be a lifelong process and you will be expected to understand and embrace that journey." Also, Cox cautions against choosing intercountry adoption as a way of avoiding relationships with birthfamilies. "Because of the internet and the advances other countries are making toward openness, more adoptees are searching for and finding their birthfamilies," she says.

Cox and other experts say staying flexible helps when navigating the complexities that are a part of international adoption. That certainly helped Kristy and Jacob DeGraw when they were adopting their son Miles. They were caught off guard when Ethiopia starting requiring parents to be present at two official procedures, often weeks to months apart. Even though the DeGraws knew they'd do whatever was required, the idea of traveling to Ethiopia twice in a short period of time was a shock.

Yet traveling to the country was moving. "It was one of the most beautiful and life-changing experiences of our lives," says Kristy. "The poverty was more than we could have ever imagined. But the hospitality of the Ethiopian people is like nothing else. They are full of joy and it's a beautiful country full of history and rich culture. We are so blessed to be a part of Ethiopia."

Adoption From Foster Care: Building a support system

▶ **53,000**

Approximate number of children adopted from foster care in 2010 in the U.S.

BACKGROUND: Many of the children in the foster care system are school age and often part of sibling groups that need to be adopted together. Because these children have suffered the kinds of trauma that meant they needed to be removed from their biological families, many have some kind of emotional, physical, or educational disability.

AVERAGE COSTS: Adopting through the foster care system involves little to no costs. Ongoing medical assistance is provided by the government for every child, and 90 percent of foster care adoptions include a monthly stipend in the range of \$400 to \$600 to help with costs until the child reaches adulthood.

AVERAGE WAIT TIME: Depends on the circumstances, but prospective adoptive parents who are just starting out should plan on the process taking at least nine months. Wait times are usually longer for young children.

REQUIREMENTS: Prospective adoptive parents must first become foster parents (which includes classroom training) and need to have a criminal history check to prove they have no record of endangering children. Prospective parents must also demonstrate an ability to financially support their family without the adoption assistance funding.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW: You don't need to be a superhuman parent to be the kind of loving mom or dad these children need. "You don't have to own a home or drive a fancy car," says Kathy Ledesma, the national project director of AdoptUSKids, a federally funded nonprofit that raises public awareness of the need for families for children who are in foster care. "You just need to have the capacity to accept and nurture a child and have a good support system."

Parents find great joy in adopting foster children, Ledesma says. "It's incredible. When parents can discover and bring out natural talents that hadn't been nurtured, that's tremendously satisfying," she says.

That's what Christina and Trevor Tutt have experienced with their daughter Bailey, who tested positive for fetal exposure to cocaine when she was born. Bailey came to them as a foster child when she was 5 days old and was eventually adopted by the couple.

Now 4, Bailey has been diagnosed with seizures, ADHD, aggression in early childhood, and fetal alcohol effect. But even though Christina juggles speech and occupational therapy appointments with the routines of raising a large family—the Tutts have eight children—she would never trade her life as Bailey's mom. "I know on paper she sounds like an impossible challenge, but she's a great kid," she says. "I love her zest for living."

Elizabeth Foy Larsen writes for Adoptive Families, Mother Jones, and other publications.



▶ As a baby, Bailey entered foster care and was soon adopted by her foster parents.

CHOOSING AN AGENCY

In the same way that you'd research the school you'd choose for your children or any major investment you'd make, it's important to not just sign up with the first adoption agency you come across. Creating a Family, a nonprofit that provides education and support for adoption and infertility, has an excellent step-by-step guide to finding a reputable agency that's right for you, at creatingafamily.org. The site also offers resources on everything from finding adoption attorneys to school issues for adopted children.

Join adoption expert Adam Pertman for a KIWI College webinar in November, National Adoption Month. Visit kiwimagonline.com/college for details.

"Adopted kids are not all alike. I have five adopted siblings, and we're all different." —*Becca, 14*



"I think it's cool to be adopted. I was lucky because my biological family cared about me and my future, so they gave me up for adoption to give me a better life." —*Jana, 12*



"Whoever adopts you are your parents."
—*Perri, 13*



WHAT KIDS HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ADOPTION

by *Maylee Wolf*



I've been KIW's kid columnist for five years, so you might already know that I'm adopted. I was born in Guangdong Province, China, and brought home to live with my parents in 1999 when I was a baby. Adoption can be confusing for people—not really so much for the adopted kids, but for our friends, teachers, even our family members! So some of my adopted friends and I wanted to share with you how we feel.

Being adopted

The kids I talked to for this article feel good about being adopted! My friend Jana and I talked about why adoption is so important. She says, "If people are going to have a baby, they should keep in mind that there are kids waiting to be adopted, and there are a lot of kids who don't get adopted. They are the exact same: You raise them, you teach them how to walk and to talk—you just don't give birth to them."

Sharing our stories

Kids ask us questions about being adopted—particularly if we don't look like our parents. I don't, and neither does my friend Perri, who was also adopted from China. Becca, who was adopted from foster care, doesn't look like her mom, either. She says, "I don't go out of my way to tell people I'm adopted, but they can tell!"

We don't mind being asked questions, and we all try to help people understand adoption. But it's annoying when people don't really listen to our answers. Becca says that people make assumptions that all foster kids and adopted kids are alike. She has nine siblings, and five were adopted like she was, so she knows that everyone's story is different.

Feeling proud

Sometimes it seems like people feel bad for us or really want to know about our "real" parents. "I hate it when kids say 'real mom!'" Jana says. Perri adds: "Whoever adopts you are your parents." Also, it's hard when people are prejudiced: Perri told me about a boy who told her to go back to China! "First he thought I was Japanese so he said, 'Go back to Japan,'" she says.

The most important thing to know is that our families are our families, and we are happy. "I think it's cool to be adopted. I was lucky because my biological family cared about me and my future, so they gave me up for adoption to give me a better life," Jana says. "It's not sad at all; it's actually very happy for me and my family."

Also, my mom and I both really like what Jana's mom says: "Family isn't defined by blood relationships. It's defined by the people who you love and who love you."



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