



# ***Finding Forever Families***

A step-by-step guide to adoption



Dave Thomas  
Foundation  
for Adoption®

Forever Families for Children in Foster Care



**It's all about**  
**FAMILY.**

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## Who we are

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is committed to dramatically increasing the number of adoptions of children waiting in North America's foster care systems. Our vision: **every child will have a permanent home and a loving family.**

The Foundation provides funds to adoption agencies to support the hiring of adoption recruiters who serve the longest-waiting children in foster care. We work to build awareness about the growing need and importance of foster care adoption. And we offer educational resources, like this guide, to support the adoption journey.

### Our core beliefs:

Every child deserves a safe, loving and permanent family.

No child should linger in foster care or leave the system without a permanent family.

Every child is adoptable.

“

These children are not someone else's responsibility.  
**THEY ARE OUR RESPONSIBILITY.**

– Dave Thomas, Founder of Wendy's® and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

Since our founding in 1992, the Foundation has been guided by Dave Thomas' inspiring words. Whether you are an adoption professional, a prospective adoptive parent or someone simply interested in learning more about the process, this guide offers valuable information and resources to help you make a difference in the life of a waiting child.

# What is adoption?

When a child is adopted, that child moves permanently from one family to another family. In the process, all parental rights are legally transferred to the new parents. This means adoptive parents have the same rights and responsibilities as parents whose children were born to them. It also means adopted children have all the emotional, social, legal and familial benefits of biological children.



**Your adoption journey may begin by connecting with one of the following:**

- **Public child welfare agency**

The local branch of your state's social service department or a child and family service agency is a child welfare agency.

- **Private agency**

A private agency is licensed to facilitate domestic or international adoptions. A private agency may be secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

- **Adoption practitioner, licensed authority or lawyer**

If you choose to use a lawyer for a private adoption, be sure it is someone who you know has a strong sense of ethics and a wide knowledge of adoption laws in your state. A responsible adoption attorney will be sure the family of origin has received counseling so they are confident about their decision and ready to relinquish custody. The attorney can also ensure that you receive a complete health and medical history of both the child and the family of origin.

# Types of adoption

When starting the adoption process, you have four options.

## 1 Adopting a child from foster care in the United States

Children waiting in the foster care system vary in age, from infants to young adults. The average age of a waiting child is 8, and many have siblings with whom they should stay. The majority are healthy children who simply need and deserve loving and supportive adults in their lives.

Some children have medical challenges and other special needs that are often treatable. Support and resources are available to help.

Begin by contacting your state's public agency or another adoption organization, like the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. We support the hiring of adoption professionals in agencies across the country who are dedicated to finding permanent families for children lingering in foster care. This includes teenagers, children with special needs and siblings who are too often overlooked. Learn more at [davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org).

## 2 Adopting an infant in the United States

If you would like to adopt a baby, contact your state's public agency, a licensed private agency or an adoption attorney. To connect with an adoption attorney, contact your local bar association, the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov).

## 3 Adopting a child from another country

Hundreds of thousands of children from around the world who are orphaned need families. Rules governing international adoptions can change quickly and can be complicated. Some countries may disqualify a person from adopting based on marital status, health diagnosis, age or sexual orientation. It is important to research your options and work with an experienced and ethical agency, group or individual.

If you pursue an international adoption, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services requires that you complete a home study. In most cases, the adoption agency or person helping you can assist in completing the home study and help you find a child who needs a family.

### Learn more

- U.S. Department of State: [adoption.state.gov](http://adoption.state.gov)
- National Council For Adoption: [adoptioncouncil.org](http://adoptioncouncil.org)

## 4 Adopting a stepchild

If you are interested in stepparent adoption, consult an adoption attorney or contact the court in your state or county that handles adoption.

### Learn more

- Family Equality: [familyequality.org](http://familyequality.org)

# Getting Started

As you begin your adoption journey, take some time to look through our step-by-step guide and other resources to support the process.

Read on. *A child is waiting.*



We all love each other, and we're kind, and we're all good  
**AT HAVING FUN TOGETHER.**

– *Dawson, adopted at age 7*



**Dave Thomas**

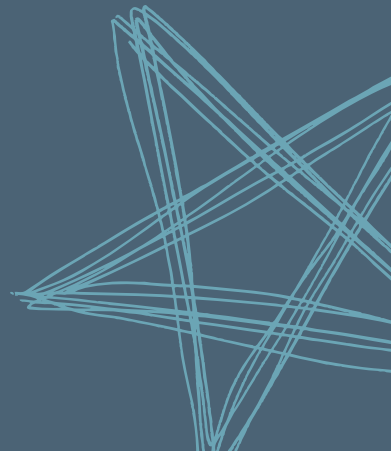
*Founder of Wendy's and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption*

Dave was a successful businessman known for his honesty, his hard work and the business he built: Wendy's. He was also adopted, and in 1992, he created the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to help give other children a forever family and the foundation for a brighter future.

# 10 steps to building your forever family

Like Dave Thomas, every child has a story to tell, and every family has its own set of traditions. This makes every adoption unique.

But all adoptions share a common process. Explore **10 steps** to help you be fully prepared to *welcome a new child (or children) into your life.*



## Step 1:

### Explore the options for adopting a child.

Exploring your wishes for family and your parenting style can help put a successful adoption on the right track. Before choosing what kind of adoption you want, take a quick personal inventory.

#### How many of the following characteristics describe you?

- A belief in adoption and the ability to commit to a child
- Patience and perseverance
- A good sense of humor and talent for keeping life in perspective
- A love of children and parenting
- The ability to accept without judgment and to love unconditionally
- Awareness that healing doesn't always come quickly
- Willingness to teach an adopted child about their race, culture and ethnicity (This is a requirement for some international adoptions)
- Resourcefulness

**If most (or all) of these qualities describe you, then take it one step further.**

#### Ask yourself:

- Do I clearly understand why I want to adopt?
- If I have a partner, do we work as a team? Are we both committed to adoption?
- Do I have the time necessary to meet the needs of children?
- Have I discussed adoption with friends and family members, including my children?
- Do I have support systems to help me after I adopt, or do I know where to find them?

Use your answers to the above questions as food for thought.

#### Which type of adoption best fits with your beliefs and goals as a parent?

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## Step 2: Research the costs.

The total cost of adoption depends on several factors, such as the type of adoption, the agency through which you adopt, the state in which you live, attorney fees and whether travel is required.

Foster care adoption typically costs \$0 to \$5,000 in nominal fees and home studies, while private infant or international adoption might cost \$30,000 to \$60,000 or more. Subsidies are often available for families who adopt from foster care. You can also talk to your employer about adoption benefits and consult your tax adviser about possible tax credits.

For more information on support available, visit our Financial Resources for Adoptive Families page at [davethomasfoundation.org/FinancialResources](https://davethomasfoundation.org/FinancialResources)



## Step 3:

### Select an adoption agency.

Not all adoption agencies are alike, so choose carefully. Some handle the entire adoption process, helping you throughout. Others expect you to take the initiative to learn about procedures and deadlines. Get a sense of how much control you want over the process and then decide on an approach and agency that fits you best.

You must work with an agency operating in the state where you currently live. You may choose to work with a public or private agency. Contact your state adoption unit for available options. Be sure each agency you consider is licensed to provide adoption services in your state.

#### Find agencies in your area:

- Contact your state’s adoption unit for a list of licensed adoption agencies — both public and private
- Look online for licensed private adoption agencies. Confirm with the agency that it is licensed
- Contact adoptive parent support groups or adoptive parents for referrals
- Check the Child Welfare Information Gateway at [childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov)

#### To find a public or private agency that is a good fit for you, consider asking:

- What kind of children does the agency place (ages, backgrounds, etc.)?
- How many children has the agency placed in each of the past few years?
- How will the agency conduct a search for me?
- What kind of training is provided for parents?
- Can I be a foster parent and still be considered as an adoptive parent?
- What criteria does the agency use to match children with families?
- What type of adoptive parents does the agency seek?
- How long, on average, must one wait for a child?
- What does the home study entail?
- If I learn of a child available for adoption in another state, will the agency pursue the child?
- How much does an adoption cost — in total and each part?
- Can the agency help locate sources of financial aid, including subsidies?
- Can the agency provide references from parents who recently adopted?
- What post-adoption resources are provided by the agency?

## Step 4: Work with an agency.

Once you have selected an agency, it is finally time to begin the formal adoption process. Ask your agency for guidance. Typically, you will attend an orientation meeting or training session for prospective adoptive parents, where you will:

- Meet adoption professionals and learn about policies and practices
- Learn about the children who are available
- Be asked to examine your feelings about adoption and determine if adoption is the right choice for you
- Gain insight into the challenges and rewards of adoptive parenting
- Get application materials

### **Attend an orientation session**

If possible, attend an orientation session before filling out an application so you are confident in the agency's abilities to meet your needs. Application fees are often non-refundable, even if you decide to work through a different agency or change your mind about adopting.

Once you have chosen an agency and have completed the application process, ask your adoption professional how you should go about scheduling and preparing for your home study.

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## Step 5:

### Begin your home study.

A home study is much more than a background check on you and members of your household. It is a way for your adoption professional to get to know you; to educate you about the adoption process; and to prepare you to parent a child who brings experiences, ideas and expectations that might be different from your own.

Everyone must complete a home study. The process can take from 3 to 6 months, depending on the agency, the adoption professional and the prospective parents' cooperation.

#### **Home Study Requirements**

Home study requirements vary by agency and by state. Ask for a list of the items your agency needs to complete the process, such as birth certificates, licenses, personal references, background and criminal checks and proof of recent physical examinations.

Costs for a home study also vary, depending on the agency type. Public agencies often charge little or nothing. Private agencies typically charge \$1,000 to \$5,000.

The length of time a home study is valid is determined by your agency and your state. Home studies typically last one year and can be renewed on an annual basis thereafter.

#### **Adoption Preparation and Parenting Classes**

Many agencies offer, and sometimes require, group classes for adoptive families. Even if your agency does not require a training course, you should consider taking this opportunity to learn more about the ages and stages of childhood, the dynamics of abuse and neglect, adoption issues, the impact of trauma on children and parenting children who are adopted. The classes provide a forum for you to discuss any questions and concerns you have about the process.

It is important that you be familiar with the kinds of issues that arise when a child or sibling group joins your family. For example, older adopted children may have unique needs and life experiences that will affect their interactions with you, new siblings and new classmates.

Once you have successfully completed the classes and home study, you will be licensed or certified to adopt.



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Before adoption, I just felt like  
I had to do everything

**ON MY OWN.**

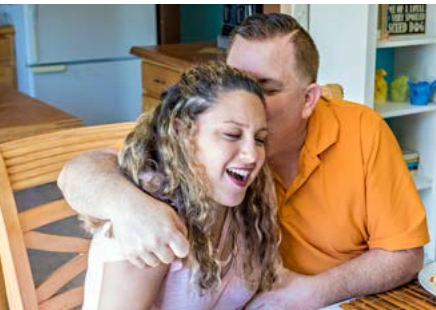
— *Lilyauna, adopted at age 18*

## Step 6:

### Find and get to know your child.

To begin the search for a child, contact your state agency, county agency or a private adoption organization in your community. Your case worker will work with you to find a child where both your needs and the child's needs are met.

Visit [davethomasfoundation.org](http://davethomasfoundation.org) to find additional adoption journey resources as well as a list of agencies that implement our Wendy's Wonderful Kids program, which finds permanent families for children lingering in foster care.



### Get to know your child

When you have found a child and have been identified as their potential family, learn as much as you can about the child. Talk to foster parents and adoption professionals.

- How often has the child moved or changed schools while in care?
- Do they still have contact with extended family?
- What are the child's favorite foods and games?
- What is the best way to comfort the child?
- What is their background? What are their birth parents like?
- What are the family's and child's medical histories?

Knowing everything possible about your child will make their transition from foster care much smoother for both you and them.

Your adoption professional should provide any available information about the child or the adoption process to help you reach your decision. They will also help you determine whether your family is the right fit for meeting the child's needs.

If the child has special needs, this is the time to decide if your family is prepared and fully committed to addressing any issues that may arise.

## A child's perspective

It is a simple fact: children waiting to be adopted from foster care have had a disruptive home life and have frequently experienced significant trauma. They've been separated from their family of origin — and often from siblings or extended family. They are often left with feelings of loss and grief and a fear of rejection.

They are eager to belong. But they may doubt themselves because of past experiences, or they may be suspicious of new adults entering their lives. They may not openly discuss specifics, but that doesn't always mean that they have fully accepted the idea of being adopted or understand what it would mean for their life.

Create a welcoming environment so a child feels comfortable discussing thoughts and feelings with you, and let them know that it's okay to talk about it.

**As you continue to build a new, permanent home for the child, keep in mind some of the questions they may have along the way:**

- Are you going to give me away someday?
- Will I be abused again?
- What about my siblings?
- Will you accept me?
- Will I have to change schools?
- What if you don't like to do the things I like to do?
- What will you want me to call you?
- Will my birth parents think I don't love them?
- Will I have to change my name?
- Do I dare hope that you will be my forever family?

**For more help answering a child's questions:**

- Contact your adoption professional
- Take advantage of counseling services offered by the agency or find another counseling professional who meets your needs
- Join an adoptive parent support group
- Seek adoption-related articles, books and other resources



## Step 7:

### Prepare for your child and get organized.

**It's time. You know your child, and now they are ready to be placed in your home. Get all the necessary documents in order, so the transition is smooth for both your child and your family.**

#### **Contact your insurance company.**

- Your child will be covered under your health insurance plan beginning on the date they are placed in your home. Find out what documents your insurance company requires for authentication, such as the adoption petition
- Check for any exclusions in your health insurance policy relating to pre-existing conditions
- Update wills and change beneficiary designations on life insurance policies, as needed

#### **Obtain a copy of your child's original birth certificate.**

It may be difficult to get this document once the adoption is finalized, but without it, your child could have trouble getting passports and other important documents.

#### **Prepare to get a new Social Security number and birth certificate.**

Your child will need IDs that reflect a new last name and family situation. If your child already has a Social Security number, you may be able to keep the number and change their name by using a new birth certificate. Regardless of what you choose to do, your child must have a Social Security number for you to claim them as a dependent.

#### **Line up services for your child and for yourself.**

- Child care if you adopt a younger child — some states provide it
- School enrollment for older children
- Therapy, counseling and tutoring options
- Support groups for adoptive parents







On adoption day, I was like,  
'Oh my gosh, it's actually going to be

**PERMANENT.'**

— *Preston, adopted at age 15*

## Step 8:

### Bring your child home and petition to adopt.

Children who are placed with an adoptive family through a public agency may move in as soon as the parents are approved. This means you have completed all required pre-placement visits and the timing is not disruptive to the child's schooling or other activities. You assume temporary legal custody of the child once they are placed in your home.

Your adoption agency will monitor the placement while your family adjusts. This monitoring period normally takes about six months, but can be as short as a few weeks and as long as a year. The adoption professional may call or visit so that you can discuss how the placement is working for your new child and for you. The next step is for your agency to recommend that the court approve your adoption.

#### Adoption Petition

After your agency recommends you, it's time to petition to adopt. The petition is the document that makes your adoption legal. On the document, you formally request permission to adopt your child and then file it with the court.

To file a petition, you and your adoption professional (or attorney) will need to present the following (guidelines vary by state or jurisdiction):

- The child's birth certificate or birth date and place of birth
- A written statement confirming your desire and suitability to adopt, as well as your ability to financially provide for the child
- A written declaration from the child's adoption professional or agency that the adoption is in the child's best interest
- The date on which you received custody of the child, and from whom you were awarded custody
- A statement from the child's adoption professional or agency of the legal reason why the birth parents' rights were terminated
- Written disclosure of any relationship that you share with the child (other than as an adoptive parent), such as being the child's aunt, grandparent, stepparent, coach or teacher

Consult an attorney if you need more guidance with the legal process.

## Step 9: Finalize the adoption.

**A finalization hearing legally completes the adoption process.\* It is when you, the adoptive parent or parents, are given permanent legal custody of the child.**

These hearings typically take place within 6 to 12 months after the child is placed in your home. Your adoption professional or attorney will notify you of the date and time. The proceeding lasts about 10 to 30 minutes and will include you, your adopted child, your family's lawyer and the adoption professional who placed the child. Be sure you have completed the necessary paperwork. The finalization could be delayed if you are missing any required documents.

The court will seek to establish that the child has been placed in a safe, loving home. Be prepared to provide all the identifying information included in your adoption petition, in addition to answering open-ended questions, like:

- Why do you want to adopt?
- How will you care for your new child?
- How will your family adjust to the new child?
- Is there anything the court should know before finalizing the adoption?

As soon as the judge signs the adoption order, you gain permanent, legal custody of your child. Finalization is the last formal step in the adoption process and the official beginning of your new family.

\*Some states finalize adoptions through paperwork only, and there is no hearing.

## Step 10:

### Celebrate family and stay informed.

Children who are adopted often have had difficult starts in life. As a result, they may need help with behavioral, emotional or developmental issues. Adoptive parents can access post-adoption resources to help their children thrive, such as family and child counseling, parent support groups, specialized educational support, respite child care, and grief and loss counseling.

#### What's next?

- Ask your adoption agency if they provide financial assistance for adoptive parents
- Search for post-adoption resources in your state or county
- Ask adoptive parents or local adoption support groups for recommendations
- Find out if your employer provides adoption benefits
- Explore the Foundation's step-by-step guide to post adoption, Strengthen Your Forever Family, at [davethomasfoundation.org/PostAdoptGuide](https://davethomasfoundation.org/PostAdoptGuide)

#### Choosing a provider

Find a professional who understands the needs of adopted children and their families. Do they have experience with foster and adoptive families? Have they received adoption-related training? Request a reference from one or two families they have worked with previously.

Most importantly, once you've successfully completed the adoption process, you're not all on your own. The following agencies and resources can help you along the way:

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[aap.org](https://www.aap.org)

Families Rising  
[wearefamiliesrising.org](https://www.wearefamiliesrising.org)

Center for Adoption Support and Education  
[adoptionssupport.org](https://www.adoptionssupport.org)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Child Welfare Information Gateway  
[childwelfare.gov](https://www.childwelfare.gov)

Family Equality  
[familyequality.org](https://www.familyequality.org)

# Frequently asked questions

**Q: What types of adoption are available?**

A: The four main types of adoption are:

- Adopting a child from the United States foster care system
- Adopting an infant in the United States
- Adopting an infant or child from another country
- Adopting a stepchild

**Q: What are the qualifications to adopt? For example, do we as adoptive parents have to be the same race or have the same ethnic background as the child we adopt? Do we have to be married, or within a certain age range or income level?**

A: Requirements may vary by state, but in general, families are as diverse as the children who are available for adoption.

**Q: What qualities are important for parents who adopt?**

A: Traits like flexibility, patience, good problem-solving skills and a willingness to identify local community resources are all critical. Children don't need perfect parents, just loving individuals willing to meet the unique challenges of parenting and make a lifetime commitment to caring for and nurturing them.

**Q: What is the adoption process?**

A: The adoption process can vary depending on the type of adoption, the agency through which you work, the state in which you live and the state or county of residence of the child. Once you choose an adoption agency, the adoption professional will walk you through the process. In all cases, a home study and background check will be necessary. In addition, adoption preparation classes are required for foster care adoption.

**Q: What is a home study?**

A: A home study is an in-depth application and interview process with a adoption professional that involves in-person interviews, reference checks, background checks and home visits. The study is not standardized and may vary from state-to-state and agency-to-agency. The average home study usually takes 3 to 6 months to complete.

**Q: How much does adoption cost?**

A: It depends on a number of factors, such as type of adoption, the agency through which you work, the state in which you live, attorney fees and whether or not travel is required. Foster care adoption can cost \$0 to \$5,000 in nominal fees and home studies, while private or international adoption might cost \$30,000 to \$60,000 or more.

**Q: How long does the adoption process take?**

A: There are many variables that determine how long it will take to complete the adoption process, such as whether adoption preparation classes are required, the length of time to complete the home study and the length of time to identify a child for your family. On average, the adoption process can take 1 to 2 years.

**Q: Why are children in foster care?**

A: Children are placed in foster care after enduring abuse, neglect, parental drug use or other issues, and many have experienced countless layers of trauma, grief and loss in their lives. A child might live temporarily with extended family, a foster family or in a group home while adoption professionals try to help the family of origin. The priority of the foster care system is to keep families together. But when a judge has ruled that it is unsafe for a child to return to their family of origin, they need someone to step forward to adopt them.

Ages range from infant to teenager, and virtually every race, ethnic group and socioeconomic category is represented. Some children are waiting alone and others are waiting with siblings.

**Q: How do I find the right adoption agency for me?**

A: To find an adoption agency that is a good fit for your family, consider:

- Is the agency licensed by the state?
- What kind of children does the agency place?
- How many children does the agency place each year?
- How does the agency conduct searches for waiting children?
- What criteria does the agency use to match children with families?
- Can the agency provide references from parents who recently adopted?

## **Why foster care adoption?**

Because *every child* deserves a safe, loving and permanent family. These children are *our responsibility*.



Now that I'm with my forever family,

I FEEL LIKE  
I CAN BE ME.

— Brianna, adopted at age 17

## Additional resources

### **American Academy of Pediatrics**

**[aap.org](http://aap.org)**

Provides services supporting the optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents and young adults.

### **Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.)**

**[adoptionsupport.org](http://adoptionsupport.org)**

Offers specialized adoption-competent in-person and teletherapy, case management, parent and teen support groups, and educational resources, including parent and professional trainings.

### **Child Welfare Information Gateway**

**[childwelfare.gov](http://childwelfare.gov)**

Provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families, including resources about foster care adoption.

### **Child Welfare League of America**

**[cwla.org](http://cwla.org)**

Coordinates efforts for child welfare in the United States, and provides direct support to agencies that serve children and families.

### **Family Equality**

**[familyequality.org](http://familyequality.org)**

Advances legal and lived equality for LGBTQ+ families, and for those who wish to form them, through building community, changing hearts and minds, and driving policy change.

### **Families Rising**

**[wearefamiliesrising.org](http://wearefamiliesrising.org)**

Maintains a list of parent support groups and other sources of information about adoption and post-adoption.

### **Fostering Families Today/Adoption Today**

**[adoptinfo.net](http://adoptinfo.net)**

Offers resources, expert opinions, practical advice and information on the latest evidence-based best practices for supporting children and youth who come from traumatic backgrounds.

### **National Council For Adoption**

**[adoptioncouncil.org](http://adoptioncouncil.org)**

Meets the diverse needs of children, birth parents, adopted individuals, adoptive families and all those touched by adoption through global advocacy, education, research, legislative action and collaboration.

# Glossary

**Adoption:** A legal process in which an adult assumes legal and other responsibilities for another, usually a minor.

**Adoption agency:** An organization licensed by the state that provides services to families of origin, adoptive parents and children who need families. Agencies may be public or private, secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

**Adoption benefits:** Compensation to workers through employer-sponsored programs that may include financial reimbursement for adoption expenses and paid or unpaid adoption leave.

**Adoption placement:** The point at which a child begins to live with prospective adoptive parents or, in the case of foster care adoption, the point at which the status of the placement changes to adoption.

**Adoption subsidies:** Federal or state adoption benefits (also known as adoption assistance) designed to help offset the short- and long-term costs associated with adopting children who need special services.

**Adoption tax credit:** The federal adoption tax credit has helped thousands of American families offset the costs of adoption since it was established in 1997. The one-time credit per adopted child applies to all types of adoption (except stepparent adoption). Many states also have adoption tax credits. Learn more from the Internal Revenue Service at 800-829-3676 or [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov), or consult your tax professional.

**Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA):** Passed in 1997, ASFA (Public Law 105-89) clarified the importance of safety to child welfare decision-making and emphasized to states the need for prompt and continuous efforts to find permanent homes for children. Permanent homes might be with families of origin, if accomplished safely, or with adoptive families or permanent legal guardians.

**At-risk placement or legal-risk placement:** The placement of a child into a prospective adoptive family when parental rights have not yet been legally severed or when rights have been severed but the appeal period has not expired.

**Concurrent planning:** A process in foster care case management to reduce the time a child spends in foster care before being placed with a permanent family. Child welfare staff work toward family reunification and, at the same time, develop an alternative permanency plan for the child should reunification efforts fail.

**Consent form:** The legal document signed by birth parents that terminates their parental rights to their child.

**Custody:** The care, control and maintenance of a child that is legally awarded by the court to an agency (in abuse and neglect cases) or to parents (in divorce, separation or adoption proceedings). Child welfare departments retain legal custody and control of major decisions for a child in foster care. Foster parents do not have legal custody of the children for whom they provide care.

**Decree of adoption:** A legal order that finalizes an adoption.

**Disruption:** When a child leaves the adoptive home prior to the finalization of the adoption. This can occur when the adoptive parents choose to return the child for reasons of their own, or when the agency disrupts the adoption if the adoptive parents are not complying with post-placement requirements or are endangering the child in any way.

**Domestic adoption:** The adoption of a U.S. infant through a licensed adoption agency or adoption attorney.

**Fictive kin:** People not related by birth or marriage who have an emotionally significant relationship with an individual.

**Finalization:** The legal process that makes the adoption permanent and binding.

**Foster parent(s):** An individual or couple who has temporary care of a child but has no legal rights in determining certain aspects of a child's life.

**Foster to adoption:** In this type of placement, foster parents agree to adopt the child if and when parental rights are terminated. Adoption professionals place the child with specially trained foster-adopt parents who will work with the child during family reunification efforts, but who will adopt the child if they become available for adoption.

**Guardian ad litem:** A person, sometimes an attorney, appointed by the court to ensure that the child's best interests are addressed in court hearings and other proceedings. In many jurisdictions, court-appointed special advocate (CASA) volunteers serve as guardians ad litem.

**Home study:** Also called a family profile, this is an in-depth review that prospective adoptive parents must complete to be able to legally adopt. A home study typically includes inspections of the adoptive parents' residence; evaluations of their relationships, parenting ideals, medical history, employment verification and financial status; and criminal background checks. Home studies can become outdated and typically need to be renewed after one year.

**Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA):** The Indian Child Welfare Act is a federal law that seeks to keep American Indian children with American Indian families. Congress passed ICWA in 1978 in response to the alarmingly high number of Indian children being removed from their homes by both public and private agencies. The intent of Congress under ICWA was to “protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families.” ICWA sets federal requirements that apply to state child custody proceedings involving an Indian child who is a member of or eligible for membership in a federally recognized tribe.

**International adoption:** The adoption of a child who is a citizen of one country by adoptive parents who are citizens of a different country.

**Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC):** The legal agreement between the states concerning a child living in one state being adopted by parents living in another state. In addition to obtaining a home study and following their state’s adoption laws, prospective adoptive parents must comply with the adoption laws of the child’s state of residence. Families who are involved in an adoption across state lines generally work both with an adoption worker in their home state to complete a home study and pre-service training, and with another adoption worker in the child’s state to walk them through the steps needed to satisfy the ICPC requirements.

**Legally free for adoption:** A child is legally free when the parental rights of the family of origin have been terminated by the court and all appeals have been exhausted.

**Life book:** A pictorial and written representation of the child’s life designed to help the child understand their unique background and history. The life book usually includes information on birth parents and other relatives, birthplace and birth date. It may be put together by adoption professionals or foster or adoptive parents working with the child.

**Matching:** The process of combining the best interests of the child with qualified adoptive parents. The best interests of the child are determined by adoption professionals, advocates and, with older children, their wishes.

**Multi-Ethnic Placement Act/Inter-ethnic Placement Act (MEPA/IEPA):** Sometimes called “Removal of Barriers to Inter-ethnic Placement,” this is a federal law enacted in 1994 (MEPA) and amended in 1996 (IEPA). These two laws (together known as MEPA/IEPA) remove race, ethnicity and country of origin from effective consideration when child welfare workers are making placement decisions for children in the public child welfare system.

**Open adoption:** An adoption plan in which identifying information about birth and adoptive families is openly shared. There may be ongoing contact after placement occurs.

**Parental rights:** All legal rights and corresponding legal obligations that come with being the legal parent of a child.

**Permanency planning:** A goal-directed process designed to prepare children and families for a permanent living arrangement. This includes adoption, legal guardianship or permanent placement with a relative or non-relative.

**Placement:** The point in time when the child goes to live with their legal adoptive parents. This can also be a “pre-adoptive” placement for a six-month pre-finalization period.

**Post-legal adoption services:** Services provided subsequent to legal finalization of the adoption. There are primarily four types of post-legal service providers: social service agencies, private therapists, mental health clinics and support groups for parents and children.

**Post-placement supervision:** Upon placement and prior to adoption finalization, an adoption professional will be assigned to complete post-placement supervision of the adoptive family. The adoption professional will visit the home during a set period of time (according to state or county requirements) to determine if adoption of the child is in the best interests of the child.

**Private adoption agency:** An agency licensed by the state to facilitate domestic adoptions, international adoptions or both. A private agency may be secular or religious, for profit or nonprofit.

**Public adoption agency or public child welfare agency:** This is the state or county government agency that has legal custody of children in foster care and is responsible for placing them in foster and/or adoptive homes.

**Special needs children:** This includes several categories relating to disabilities, age, sibling status and at-risk status. When a child is determined to be a member of a special needs group, they may qualify for adoption assistance payments (subsidies).

**Termination of parental rights (TPR):** The legal process that permanently severs a parent’s rights to a child.

**Title IV-E funding:** Federal foster care funds, authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, are paid to states on an uncapped, “entitlement” basis, meaning any qualifying expenditure by a state will be partially reimbursed, or matched without limit. Definitions of which expenses qualify for reimbursement are laid out in regulations and policy interpretations.

## Glossary *continued...*

**Trauma:** Many children in foster care suffer a variety of traumatic events, such as physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic and community violence, separation from family members and re-victimization by others. Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child's physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn and concentrate, impulse control, self-image and relationships with others. Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems, including addiction, chronic physical conditions, depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors and other psychiatric disorders.

**Waiting children:** Children in the public child welfare system who cannot return to their family of origin and need a safe, loving and permanent family to help them grow up safe and secure.

**Wendy's Wonderful Kids®:** A signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption that supports the hiring of adoption professionals, known as recruiters, who are dedicated to finding permanent families for children in foster care who are too often overlooked. That includes teenagers, children with special needs and siblings. Learn more at [davethomasfoundation.org/wwk](https://davethomasfoundation.org/wwk).





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