

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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August 2014

NO.
74

Choosing an Adoption Agency

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I am always struck by how much adoption has changed since the 1980s, when I first began working as an intern at an adoption agency. At that time, most prospective adoptive families would have chosen to use a local agency to adopt a child. Years ago, when people used to ask me “How do I pick a good adoption agency?” One of the first things I would tell them is to look at resources within their own community, so they would have the opportunity to meet in person with the agency staff and develop an open, genuine relationship with that organization. I advised adopting parents to keep in touch with their agency after placement, and use it as a resource over time, letting staff know about their families’ needs and how the agency could continue to support and serve them.

Today, many families choose to work with agencies based in other states. Families might select these agencies based on a number of criteria, including reputation, size, and available programs. They may have already been identified as prospective adoptive parents by an expectant parent considering adoption. It is more than possible for good agencies to provide excellent services to children and families in other states, though it can be more difficult to foster and maintain a personal connection across the miles. The ability to communicate promptly and efficiently, deliver information and training, provide pre- and post-placement support, and remain connected to clients over the long term are all hallmarks of a good agency.

As much as adoption has changed over the years, the most common question I receive—from expectant parents considering adoption, as well as prospective adoptive parents—is: “How do I know if an agency is the right one for me?”



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Agency Licensing

Some people choose different agencies to complete different services. They might complete homestudy requirements with one agency and pursue placement through another. Others choose to work with adoption attorneys, and contract with agencies for homestudy and other requirements. Adopting through an adoption agency doesn't prevent you from seeking out separate legal counsel if you choose.

If you do adopt through an agency, you should always choose a reputable, licensed adoption agency. Licensing requirements vary by state, but every state does clearly define which entities can place children, and what standards those agencies need to meet and maintain. Each state has a licensing division that oversees adoption, and drafts a set of minimum standards for child-placing agencies. These licensing divisions set criteria for agency staff: educational qualifications, training requirements, sometimes even office/administrative staff requirements and regulations governing the storage of records. We strongly caution adoptive parents and expectant parents considering adoption against working with any entities or facilitators other than licensed adoption agencies or full-service adoption attorneys.¹

For Parents Considering Adoption

A good adoption agency has obligations to both expectant parents considering adoption and prospective adoptive parents. There can be competing interests, and serving both types of clients—and the child, first and foremost, who cannot speak for himself—requires a strong ethical commitment and quality counseling services.

Expectant parents considering adoption should only select an adoption agency if they feel confident that agency and its staff will be fully committed to them. What sort of pre-adoption services are offered? What post-placement support is available? Does the agency understand and respect the rights of expectant parents considering adoption, and are these rights clearly communicated, up front, in writing?

Expectant parents and birth parents should always feel supported by their adoption agency. They should be able to receive quality support services and adoption-related counseling at any time—while they are considering adoption; up until placement; and even years after an adoption is finalized—as life changes may bring the need for additional support in processing the emotions connected to an adoption. Expectant parents should always be free from any coercion or pressure to place their child.² They have the

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¹ For more about the risks of working with non-licensed facilitators, see NCFA's *Adoption Advocate* No. 70, "The Role of Facilitators in Adoption," available online at www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/nca_adoption_advocate_no70.pdf

right to parent their children, the right to change their minds at any point within the time frame prescribed by state law, and the right to freely and fully consider their options without pressure from the agency, prospective adoptive parents, or any other outside party.

I am always upset when I hear that an expectant parent felt pressured to place her child, or felt as though the agency only cared about her child's and the adoptive parents' wellbeing and not hers. Parents considering adoption need and deserve quality support services and counseling, no matter what decision they ultimately make about parenting or placement. They should never be presented with a bill from the agency for services or counseling, even if they choose not to place their child. Agency professionals have a sacred obligation to walk alongside the expectant mother—and father, if he is involved—and support them before, during, and after placement.³

The rights of expectant parents and birth parents should always be clearly communicated by a placement agency. The agency should be aware of its obligations and ethical responsibilities to birth parents and those considering adoption, and train all agency staff in the importance of these responsibilities. A good adoption agency respects and honors expectant parents considering adoption, and honors the promises made to birth mothers and fathers.

Sample Questions for Expectant Parents to Ask an Agency

- What does the agency offer in terms of basic education about adoption, to help an expectant parent make her decision?
- What does the agency offer in terms of options counseling and support for pregnant clients?
- What does the agency offer in terms of post-placement services, if a parent chooses to place her child for adoption?
- Are there programs, support, and services for expectant fathers as well as expectant mothers?
- How quickly does the agency respond to questions or requests for information?
- What educational materials, books, websites, community organizations, etc. Does the agency recommend to expectant parents considering adoption?
- How much input can an expectant parent have in selecting a prospective adoptive family for her child?

² For more about expectant parent/birth parent counseling, see NCFA's *Adoption Advocate* No. 45, "Birthparent Counseling in Policy and Practice," available online at www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/documents/ncfa_adoption_advocate_no45.pdf

³ For more about expectant fathers/birth fathers and adoption, see NCFA's *Adoption Advocate* No. 37, "Fathers, Families, and Friends: Involving and Prioritizing a Pregnant Client's Support System," available online at www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCFA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO37.pdf

- How does the agency view and communicate birth parent rights?
- How does the agency facilitate contact and communication between birth and adoptive families after a placement?
- Can the agency provide any opportunities to speak with or ask questions of birth parents who have placed children through the agency?
- How does the agency support birth parents over the long term?
- What will/must be communicated to the expectant father? Who is responsible for this communication and what forms may it take?
- What are the state laws under which the agency must operate?
- What changes are there in the law if I give birth or place my child in a different state? Will my rights and the way my agency or attorney supports me change there?

For Prospective Adoptive Parents

Recently, when an acquaintance asked me about a particular adoption agency, I went to the agency's website to learn more about it. I saw that this agency was advertising programs in countries that have either shut down their intercountry adoption programs, or significantly slowed the rate of placement. I couldn't find any statements on the agency's website that made this fact clear to prospective adoptive families.

If the agency is working in other countries, it needs to be Hague-accredited. Any good agency or adoption attorney should be focused on finding the best possible family for a child, not finding a child for a family. All adoptive families should be concerned with the ethics of placement, and should search for an agency that truly respects and tries to serve expectant parents and birth parents. Adoptive parents must understand that they, too, benefit when expectant parents are well counseled, well treated, and well served. It's better for birth parents, adopted children, and adoptive families when expectant parents receive the respect and support they deserve.

When I worked for a licensed child-placing agency, we spent an hour and a half, at minimum, with every prospective adoptive family before they even applied to adopt through our agency. We encouraged families to bring all of their questions, and laid out the agency's requirements and expectations long before we moved to the official application phase. Those hoping to adopt should always have an opportunity to participate in a similar orientation/question-and-answer session before making any sort of commitment to the agency—and before they are asked to sign any papers or pay any fees apart from low application fees.

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There is no set formula for choosing an agency through which to adopt; every adoptive family might have its own set of criteria. Prospective adoptive parents should look at what an agency has to offer in terms of quality of staff, and staff members' degrees, training, and years of experience. Keep in mind that you might find a wonderful agency that simply is not the right agency for you—due perhaps to a personality mismatch or a difference in philosophy.

Some agencies are more structured, requiring scheduled appointments ahead of time. Others have more of an “open door” policy, allowing clients to call regularly or drop by if needed to talk or consult. It doesn't mean that the latter is better than the former—it all depends on what sort of agency a family is looking for.

A good adoption agency will have a philanthropic, community-minded spirit, but it should also be professionally competent. The best of intentions cannot ensure an ethical adoption process in which all parties are well served. Unless an agency is really able to provide supervision at every level, at every stage—unless they can provide all the oversight necessary before the placement and demonstrate their ability to provide support after the adoption—than they shouldn't be doing something as complicated as providing adoption services.

The majority of adoption agencies are nonprofit. There are some for-profit adoption professionals as well, such as adoption attorneys and for-profit agencies.

Sample Questions for Prospective Adoptive Parents to Ask an Agency

- What requirements does the agency have for prospective adoptive parents?
- What is this agency's experience and background in the type of adoption you want to pursue?
- How quickly do agency staff respond to questions or requests for information? Is communication handled in person? By phone? By email?
- How often do agency staff communicate personal and program updates to prospective parents?
- What type of pre-adoption education does the agency provide?
- What does the agency offer in terms of post-adoption support services?
- How long has the agency existed, and how many placements has it made? How many does it typically make in a year, for example? How many waiting families are there?

- What educational materials, books, websites, community organizations, etc. Does the agency recommend to prospective adoptive parents?
- What fees does the agency charge, and what is the timeline for expected payment?
- Can the agency provide references from several families that have adopted through the agency? Can they produce references for the type of adoption you are considering?
- If you are pursuing intercountry adoption, can the agency account for and explain its activities and available support in-country?
- What are the state laws under which the agency must operate?

Recommendations When Selecting an Agency

Do your homework. Make sure the agency is licensed. What information can you find online about the agency? What have you heard from other adoptive families who used or considered using the agency? Agencies should also be forthcoming if you ask for references from other parents and families. Was this information easy to obtain, or was it a struggle to find answers? Are the fee arrangements (for prospective adoptive parents) transparent and understandable?

Look for experienced professionals. Agency staff should be able to readily provide their background, educational qualifications, years of experience, etc.

Expect high-quality pre-adoption orientation, education, and training. Expectant/birth parents and adoptive parents need and deserve quality pre- and post-adoption services and support, based on current research and best practices. The agency might need to refer you for some services, depending on your child's needs, but necessary referrals and support should always be available, no matter how long ago you adopted or placed your child. The goal of adoption is not to place a child in a family, but for a child to thrive in a family. A good agency will always operate under this philosophy.

Look for an agency whose information you trust. The agency should always be forthcoming about your options, fully disclose the state of a particular country or program, provide estimates of the timetables involved, and list any and all fees and the timeline for required payment. Don't leap for the first agency that makes pie-in-the-sky promises or guarantees an expedited adoption.

Pay attention to the level of responsiveness. How promptly does your agency respond to calls and emails? Do you feel agency staff expects and is prepared to meet the level and frequency of communication you desire?

Conclusion

I know from experience that many families are so eager to adopt they might feel tempted to give an agency the benefit of the doubt. The decision to place a child or adopt one is a hugely important decision—with lifelong consequences. It should not be attempted without due time, consideration, and research. Expectant parents considering adoption deserve to be respected and well served by the agency they turn to. Prospective adoptive parents also need to be able to trust and rely upon their adoption services providers.

Even a good, professional, licensed adoption agency might not be the best one for you. You must be prepared to do your homework, look at all the available options, and ask questions of the people and the agency with whom you might be working. This is the only way to make a smart and fully informed decision about which adoption agency is right for you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuck Johnson serves as president and CEO of the National Council For Adoption. He is a frequent writer, speaker, and commentator on adoption policy and practice, and currently serves on the Board of Trustees of the Council on Accreditation (COA). He has been a licensed practicing social worker since 1986. Prior to joining NCFCA, Chuck served 17 years with a licensed child-placing agency in Alabama, including eight years as its executive director. He is a graduate of Auburn University with a degree in Social Work, and holds a Masters degree from Birmingham Theological Seminary. He lives with his wife and three children in Maryland.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

NCFCA thanks Kristin Meyer, Heidi Bruegel Cox, and Jennifer Hart for their comments and suggestions.



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