

Adoption Advocate



Medically Complex Adoption: A Growing Niche in the Domestic Adoption Community

BY JENNIFER KELLY

Medically Complex Adoption: A Growing Niche in the Domestic Adoption Community

BY JENNIFER KELLY

What is medically complex adoption?

Medically complex adoption refers to the adoptive placement of children who have significant ongoing medical needs, disabilities, or developmental delays. These conditions can range from manageable chronic illnesses to life-limiting or lifelong conditions requiring specialized care. Some children require frequent medical interventions, while others may need therapies, adaptive equipment, or special education services. Once called “Special Needs Adoptions,” the terminology has evolved within the adoption community to

reflect the desire of those with disabilities to no longer be referred to as having special needs. Children in medically complex adoptions may have a wide range of conditions, including but not limited to genetic disorders, neurological conditions, congenital heart or organ defects, systemic disorders, physical disabilities, premature and/or traumatic birth, or other medical issues. These children, and therefore their adoption planning and process, require extra resources and considerations. While children adopted from foster care or through intercountry adoption may also have medical needs, this article focuses on the placement of medically complex children for private domestic adoption.

Author’s Note As a medically complex adoptive mother and adoption professional working in this field since 2013, I have witnessed the profound beauty and the significant challenges that come with parenting and placing children who have complex medical needs. In my role as the ACF+ Program Coordinator, I work alongside placing parents, adoptive families, and adoption professionals navigating these uniquely demanding and deeply meaningful placements. This perspective has shown me how essential preparation, honesty, and support are in ensuring that medically complex adoptions lead to lasting, healthy outcomes for children and families.

What should I know before I consider placing a child who is medically complex?

Placing parents want to ensure their child receives the best possible care, love, and support. Understanding the unique aspects of medically complex adoption can help with making an informed choice that prioritizes a child's well-being.

Placing parents in a medically complex adoption may face tremendous feelings of guilt or judgment as they consider alternatives to parenting. Often these parents are married or long-term couples with intended pregnancies who would not be making an adoption plan if it were not for an unexpected diagnosis. Parents considering adoption for their medically complex child should know that feeling unable to parent, or even just not wanting to parent, is okay. Parenting a child with significant medical needs requires an immense amount of time, energy, and resources. Some parents may feel overwhelmed by the emotional, financial, or physical demands, while others may recognize that they are not in a position to provide the level of care their child needs. These feelings do not mean a parent does not love their child; instead, they reflect the parent's attempt to honestly assess what is best for both the child and the family. They are also not alone. There are numerous

Parenting a child with significant medical needs requires an immense amount of time, energy, and resources.

emotional support resources available to them as they explore parenting and its alternatives. Adoption workers, marriage counselors, therapists, clergy, support groups, and their own emotional support circle members can help individuals navigate these feelings and find what works best in their specific situation.

It is essential for parents considering adoption in any circumstance to carefully consider which professionals to work with, but even more so in cases with high medical needs. Adoption professionals provide emotional support to the placing parents, assist in finding the most suitable adoptive family, and extend their support to them.

What should I know before I consider adopting a child who is medically complex?

Adoptive parents choose to pursue medically complex adoption for a variety of reasons, but each family is eagerly hoping to be selected as the adoptive parents. Any family considering medically complex adoption should carefully weigh their motivations, access to resources, and family dynamics before pursuing this journey. This is a lifelong commitment to a child who will need extra support and strong advocates to reach their fullest potential. It is also crucial to consider the significant impact this decision will have on other children in the household. Siblings may experience feelings of jealousy or confusion about changes to the family's routine and/or the amount of attention that is focused on meeting the new child's needs. Siblings may feel a sense of responsibility toward the child that is beyond what they feel toward other siblings. At the

[Medically complex adoption] is a lifelong commitment to a child who will need extra support and strong advocates to reach their fullest potential.

same time, siblings may also develop deeper empathy and resilience. Parents must keep open communication within the family and ensure they can balance meeting all of their children's unique needs.

Medically complex adoptive families must have a strong support system. They may need access to medical professionals, therapists, in-home services, medical equipment providers, and even contractors if their home needs modification to accommodate the child's needs. The emotional and logistical impacts of parenting a child with high-level medical needs on the family may require additional resources to support the family structure and provide respite care. Joining parent and sibling support groups can be an excellent way to ensure family members feel heard, receive education on critical topics, and have a safe space to share their frustrations with others parenting children with medical needs. Welcoming a medically complex child into a family profoundly impacts daily life, relationships, and the support system around them, requiring commitment, flexibility, and strong resources. Before adopting, parents should ask themselves:

- Do we understand the child's medical needs and long-term care requirements?
- Are we emotionally and financially prepared for ongoing treatments, therapies, or hospitalizations?

- Do we have a reliable network of family, friends, and professionals to support us?
- Are we ready to advocate for our child in medical, educational, and community settings?

Honest reflection on these questions helps ensure the adoption is grounded in readiness, compassion, and long-term stability.

Adoptive families considering a specific medically complex child should thoroughly investigate the child's diagnoses prior to presenting themselves for consideration by the placing parents. When using the internet, parents should judiciously focus on resources that end in .gov, .edu, or .org as they tend to be the most accurate, realistic, and reliable resources. They are often developed and monitored by educational institutions and non-profit organizations focused on specific conditions. Additionally, families should consider not only the child's current needs, but also the spectrum of future needs. For example, caring for a 6-pound baby with no body control is relatively easy, as most babies are that way. However, when that baby is now 12 and weighs over 100 pounds, will the family be able to access tools and resources to assist with mobility?

Navigating private insurance is a critical aspect that adoptive parents need to prepare for early on in the adoption process. It is important for adoptive parents to review their current health policy to understand what is covered and what limitations may exist. Parents should focus on what their policy covers concerning therapies, specialists, medications, and medical equipment so they can anticipate out-of-pocket expenses. Insurance coverage for most policies can begin once placement has occurred, but there are a few private pay policies that may require waiting until an adoption is finalized. While most medically complex children will qualify

for Medicaid or some type of medical expense assistance, these programs can take time to get in place. Understanding the specifics of a family's health insurance policy will be critical for the care of a medically complex child.

Children who have medically complex conditions and who are being adopted privately usually qualify for adoption subsidy assistance.¹ Adoption subsidies help ensure a child has the resources to meet their needs. This is a program that provides critical resources to support a family and ensure children maintain stability in their adoptive homes.

What should I know as an adoption professional assisting with a medically complex adoption?

Adoption professionals may not encounter medically complex cases frequently, but they have numerous considerations to focus on. Being the custodial agency in a medically complex adoption comes with higher liability, a need for extended supervision, and a requirement to devote substantial resources to securing adoption subsidies for the child.

First, adoption professionals should be respectful of the unique grief that placing parents are experiencing. Most often, they would not be making an adoption plan if it were not for the unexpected diagnoses. Providing emotional support to placing parents is critical. Parents who are considering an adoption plan for their medically complex child should be given ample resources as they consider

...families should consider not only the child's current needs, but also the spectrum of future needs.

their options. Many states offer resources for parenting, including early intervention services, Medicaid, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), children's waiver programs, parent support groups, educational supports, non-profit foundations, and diagnosis-specific groups, all designed to support the diverse needs of parenting. Professionals working with expectant parents may be well versed in local resources for parents raising children without specific medical needs, but they may lack awareness of other options in their area for more complex children. Hospital social workers and care coordinators are often invaluable resources for understanding additional resources in a geographic proximity.

Next, adoption professionals must have a thorough understanding of a medically complex child's needs to ensure appropriate planning, placement, and long-term support. One of the most valuable resources for gaining this insight is the child's medical team, including doctors, nurses, social workers, and therapists involved in the child's care. These professionals are not only responsible for treatment but are also trained to educate others—making them essential partners in preparing adoptive families. If an agency will be assuming custody of the child after birth, they are considered part of the child's care team, and it is critical to approach this role with collaboration and open communication.

¹ Kelly, J. (2020). *A guide to adoption subsidies and assistance for adoptive parents*. National Council For Adoption. <https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/a-guide-to-adoption-subsidies-and-assistance-for-adoptive-parents/>

Due to the additional time, attention, and care these cases require, there is usually a stronger emotional attachment to the people involved, especially the child.

Engaging early on and consistently with the medical team allows adoption professionals to gather accurate, up-to-date information about the child's diagnosis, prognosis, daily care needs, and potential future interventions. This helps ensure that families are fully informed and can make educated decisions about their readiness and capacity to care for the child. Furthermore, a strong relationship with the medical team can help streamline the transition of care, provide continuity for the child, and offer ongoing support to the adoptive family after placement.

Once the adoption professional understands the child's medical needs and the resources they will require, the focus shifts to identifying potential adoptive families. Networking and outreach tools are essential in ensuring a diverse pool of families to evaluate. Using the information gathered from medical professionals and the placing parents, adoption professionals can assess each family to determine if they are appropriate. Adoption professionals should consider if each family has the following: a basic understanding of the diagnoses/willingness to learn; emotional maturity to work with care providers for the child's betterment; a strong support system and access to respite as needed; financial stability; time, availability, and attention for the complex child while balancing the other needs in the home; an appropriate physical home environment; and appropriate

motivations and expectations for adopting a medically complex child. Only families that have been screened and are found to be an appropriate adoption resource should be presented to placing parents for consideration.

Once there is a match between the placing parents, a medically complex child, and appropriate adoptive parents, the adoption professionals can proceed as they would in a typical adoption. Post-placement supervision periods will be extensive as adoption professionals work with families to secure an adoption subsidy. Therefore, adoption professionals should ensure their supervision of the placement is appropriate to monitor how the family and child are doing. Some agencies require parents to complete additional medical documentation monthly to ensure they have a clear understanding of the child's current status. Adoption professionals may also want to require additional or more frequent post placement visits, or limit the frequency of virtual post placement visits, depending on the specifics of the family's case and applicable state laws. Agencies will also need someone designated to make medical decisions for children in their custody if a medical professional determines they will not accept the adoptive parents' consent (most commonly at hospitals for critical consents like anesthesia or surgery).

Adoption professionals working with medically complex cases should also be prepared for the extra emotional investment they will be making. Due to the additional time, attention, and care these cases require, there is usually a stronger emotional attachment to the people involved, especially the child. Adoption professionals may find themselves grieving and celebrating right alongside the placing and adoptive parents. Having an emotional support system to help along the way is also important.

Conclusion

Medically complex adoption requires careful planning, informed decision-making, and strong support systems for placing parents, adoptive families, and adoption professionals. It is about seeing the worth of every child, beyond their diagnoses, and ensuring they are surrounded by unwavering love, advocacy, and opportunities. It is about the strength of children, the families who love them, and the professionals who help make these connections possible. It is the coming together of families who are willing to embrace a child's unique needs and celebrate their strengths. There may be challenges, but the reward of knowing a child has everything they need to reach their fullest potential is worth the effort.

Where can I learn more about medically complex adoptions?

Websites:

The [National Down Syndrome Adoption Network's](#) mission is to ensure that every child born with Down syndrome has the opportunity to grow up in a loving family.

[This list](#) from the Social Security Administration details which conditions are automatic medical qualifiers for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits.

Webinars:

- [Medical Special Needs Video Series](#)
- [Pre-Adoption Medical Consultations for Prospective Adoptive Parents](#)
- [Preparing for Special Needs Adoption and Parenting](#)
- [Special Needs Checklist for Prospective Adoptive Parents](#)
- [Understanding Adoption in the Healthcare Environment](#)

Articles:

- [Children with Medical Special Needs: Considering the Impact on Child Development](#)
- [Medical Issues in Adopted Children: How Can Adoption Agencies Best Support Parents Before, During, and After Adoption?](#)
- [The Role of Pre-Placement Medical Review in Contemporary Adoptions: Setting Expectations, Assessing Children's Needs, and Supporting Successful Family Formation](#)

Resource Guide:

[Adoption Medicine Practitioners](#)

Physicians specializing in the care of foster, adoptive, and kinship families are an invaluable resource, especially when children have unique medical needs. Click [here](#) for a list of adoption medicine practitioners.

Medically Complex Adoption: A Growing Niche in the Domestic Adoption Community

BY JENNIFER KELLY

About Jennifer Kelly



Jennifer Kelly, ACF+ Program Coordinator, has been working in medically complex adoption for more than 10 years. She is an adoptive mother to 4, including her late daughter, Joy. Jennifer may be the only molecular biologist working in domestic adoption, but she leverages her scientific and medical understanding along with her personal experiences to serve families of medically complex children as they explore and navigate adoption.

Originally published in 2025 by National Council For Adoption. Reprinting or republishing without express written permission is prohibited. The Adoption Advocate is edited by Nicole Davi, Emily Kwiatkowski, and Jessica Read. To inquire about guest author opportunities, please contact the NCFA education team at ncfa@adoptioncouncil.org.



National Council For Adoption
431 North Lee Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

adoptioncouncil.org/adoption-advocate
ncfa@adoptioncouncil.org
(703) 299-6633