

Adoption Advocate



Navigating International Relative Adoption: Guidance for Adoptive Parents and Professionals

BY LAUREN JIANG, E. STEFANI MOON, JANE KROL

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International relative adoption, also called intercountry kinship adoption,¹ occurs when a child is adopted from another country by a member of their extended family. Kinship adoption is widely recognized as a preferred permanency outcome for children in need of adoption, as it is associated with greater placement stability.² This understanding has led to policy and practice shifts in the U.S. foster care system, prioritizing and supporting kinship placements when possible.

Despite this, intercountry kinship adoption remains largely understudied and is therefore often less understood by both families and professionals. For example, although some adoption service providers note an increase in these cases, there is no public data to confirm this trend. The Department of State publishes annual international adoption data but does not report on the number of

international kinship or relative adoptions specifically,³ despite agencies being required to report relative adoption information to the Accrediting Entity.⁴ The absence of this data leaves this population invisible within broader intercountry adoption data.

This article seeks to enhance public understanding of international kinship

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¹ “Kinship adoption” is a broader term than “relative adoption” as it includes the adoption of biological relatives as well as fictive kin. Fictive kin are children who are not biologically related to the adopter, but are known to them, such as a child from the adopter’s community.

² Osborne, J., Hindt, L. A., Lutz, N., Hodgkinson, N., & Leon, S. C. (2021). Placement stability among children in kinship and non-kinship foster placements across multiple placements. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 126, Article 106000. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2021.106000>

³ Office of Children’s Issues. (2024). *Fiscal year 2024 annual report tab 1A: Table on intercountry adoption* (Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions). U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/NEWadoptionassets/pdfs/Fiscal%20Year%202024%20Annual%20Report%20Tab%201A%20Table%20on%20Intercountry%20Adoption.pdf>

⁴ Because the data reported to the Accrediting Entity is strictly regarding the adoption of a relative, this data will still omit the adoption of fictive kin.

adoption by providing clear, practical information to both those who are adopting relatives as well as the professionals who support them, detailing common experiences, anticipated challenges, and key considerations unique to international kinship adoption.

The International Kinship Adoption Process

Families seeking to adopt their relatives internationally often do so in response to an urgent need in their family system, and they usually face significant costs and a lengthy process to bring their relative home. Many come to adopt following the death or incapacity of a close family member, rendering a grandchild, cousin, niece, nephew or a child of another intimately held relationship in immediate need for adoption. However, nothing is immediate in intercountry adoption, and *relative adopters must expect a multi-year process* and outcomes which are not guaranteed. Families might hope that this process progresses more quickly because there is a pre-existing relationship, however it generally mirrors the adoption process of a non-relative child identically. This section details the time, cost, and uncertainty in the process and offers tips for managing these challenges while also considering a kinship adoption's unique aspects.

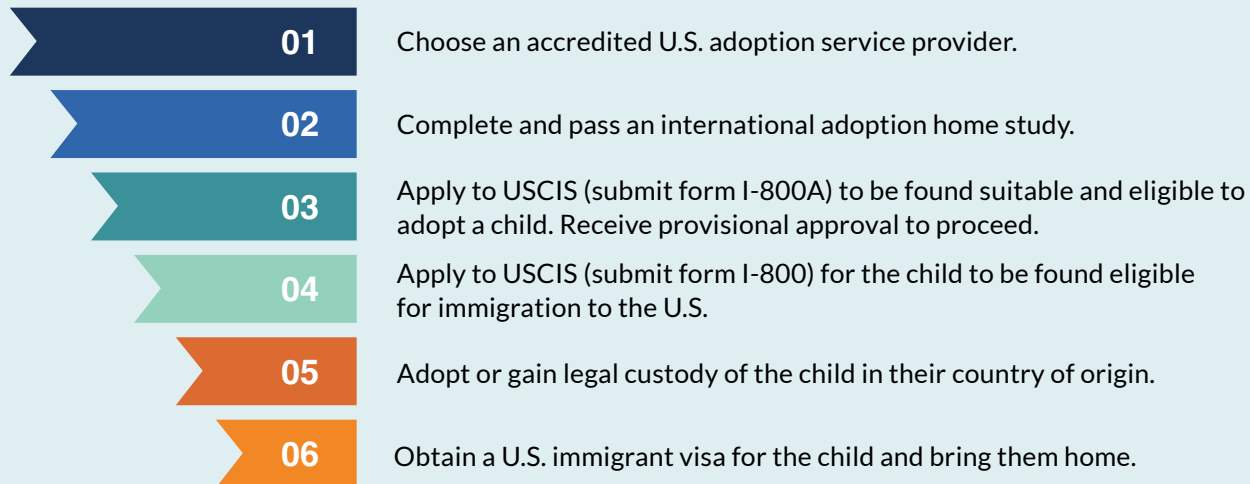
International Adoption Basics: What is the Hague Convention?

The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (commonly referred to as “The Hague Convention”) is an international treaty that provides a legal framework to ensure that ethics and the best interest of the child are central to every intercountry adoption. U.S. federal regulation requires that all intercountry adoptions be overseen by a Hague-accredited adoption service provider, regardless of whether the child resides in a country that is a part of the Hague Convention. Hague accreditation indicates that an agency complies with high ethical standards and transparent practices. Hague-accredited providers undergo rigorous and ongoing monitoring and oversight by the Accrediting Entity designated by the U.S. Department of State. The current Accrediting Entity is the Center for Excellence in Adoption Services (CEAS), which publishes a directory of all Hague-accredited adoption service providers.

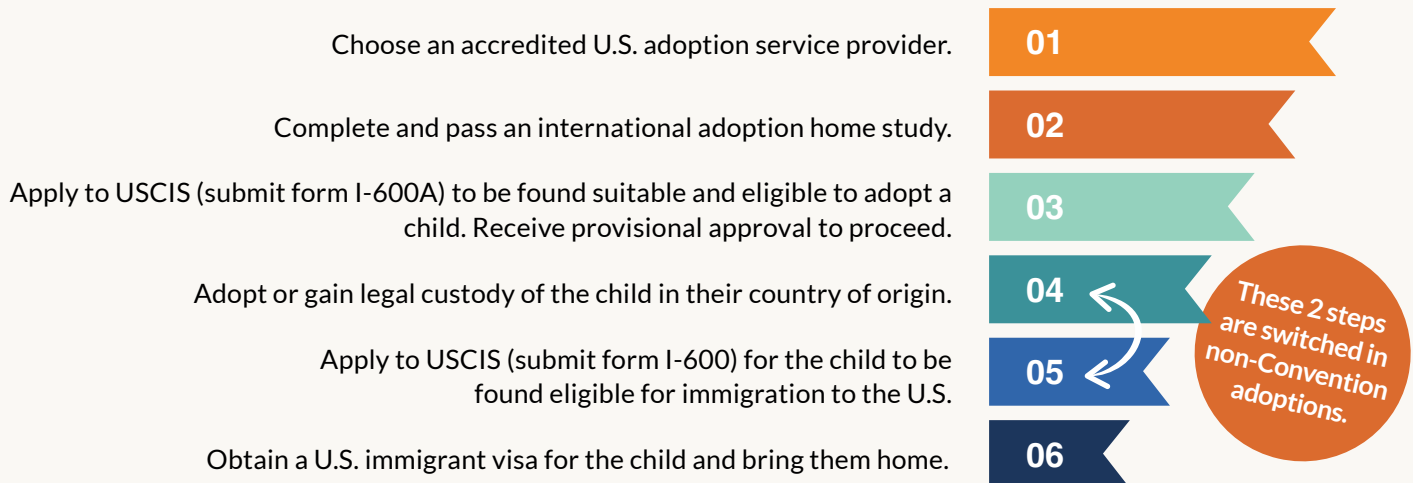
As of the date of this article, 106 countries are party to the Hague Convention. Such providers must be licensed in at least one U.S. state but do not need to be licensed in the adopter's state of residence, as Hague accreditation allows adoption service providers to complete intercountry adoptions for families anywhere in the United States. Countries and adoptions that follow the Hague Convention are often referred to as Hague countries/adoptions, and those that are not part of the Hague Convention are referred to as “non-Convention” countries/adoptions. While adoptions from non-Convention countries require a Hague-accredited adoption service provider to oversee the case, such cases follow a different immigration path.

More resources on the Hague Convention are provided in the resources section of this article, including the Center for Excellence in Adoption Services (CEAS) directory, a list of current Hague Convention countries, and the full procedures related to an adoption from a Convention and non-Convention country.

Hague Country Intercountry Kinship Adoption Process



Non-Convention Intercountry Kinship Adoption Process



Time

Many families pursuing international kinship adoption anticipate that because the child is known to them, the process may be expedited. However, these cases are subject to the same processes as non-kin adoptions, and families should be prepared for a process that still takes several years, often between two and

a half to four or more years. The timeline for each adoption is also subject to case-specific factors and may fall outside of average processing times. For Convention adoptions in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024, the average time from filing the I-800A⁵ to issuance of an adoption-based immigrant visa was 635 days.⁶ However, this figure does not capture

⁵ The I-800A is the first USCIS filing that a prospective adoptive parent will make for a Convention adoption; in this petition, the adopter is requesting USCIS's adjudication on their suitability to adopt a child from the specific country in which the child resides. The Hague-accredited agency overseeing the case will guide the adopter on when and how to file the I-800A.

⁶ Office of Children's Issues. (2024). *Fiscal year 2024 annual report tab 1A: Table on intercountry adoption* (Annual Report on Intercountry Adoptions). U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/NEWadoptionassets/pdfs/Fiscal%20Year%202024%20Annual%20Report%20Tab%201A%20Table%20on%20Intercountry%20Adoption.pdf>

the full timeline, as the I-800A can only be filed after completion of a home study, which typically takes three to four months or longer. In adoptions from non-Convention countries, comparable data is not federally published; however, case processing times throughout 2025 consistently indicated a multi-year process for I-600 based cases.⁷

Tip for adopters: If a child welfare authority, attorney, social worker, or other professional in the child's country of origin provides you an estimated timeframe, reconfirm that through your U.S.-based Hague-accredited adoption service provider; it is possible that the estimated timeframe provided by an entity in the child's country does not take into consideration the required U.S.-based procedures or immigration timelines.

Tip for professionals: Since adopters may be receiving contradictory information from trusted individuals in the child's country, it is imperative that U.S.-based adoption service providers practice cultural humility, remembering that individuals are experts in their own lived experiences. Adopters are likely to feel a mismatch between their own familiarity with the country's customs and culture versus the lengthy and tedious legal process required for an adoption that meets U.S. immigration standards. This divide can breed misunderstandings or mistrust if not approached with humility. Adoption professionals should approach such situations with openness and curiosity, rather than positioning themselves as the sole authorities in the case.

Adoption professionals can play a critical role in explicitly acknowledging this intersection of cultures while remaining mindful of their own limitations and continuing to be respectful of the adopters' personal expertise in their own culture. In practice, this might look like clearly explaining the rationale behind regulatory requirements, while validating the prospective parents' perspectives and not dismissing or minimizing their input.

Additionally, child-specific training must focus on parenting a child at the anticipated age the child will be at the time of homecoming, which is likely years older than when the adoption process starts. This includes helping families reframe expectations, recognizing that it may be a significant amount of time before their family member arrives in the U.S., and tailoring parent preparation trainings to accommodate the likelihood that a child who they know intimately now may arrive at a different developmental stage than originally envisioned.

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⁷ An I-600 case refers to an adoption from a country which is not party to the Hague Convention, in which the child's petition to immigrate to the United States is completed by filing the Form I-600 Petition to Classify an Orphan as an Immediate Relative. USCIS publishes case processing times per form-type here: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Case processing times*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times>

Cost

Intercountry relative adoptions are subject to the following fee categories:

1. Home study
2. Adoption expenses in the United States
3. Foreign country program expenses
4. Care of the child in the country of origin
5. Translation and document expenses
6. Contributions⁸
7. Post-placement or post-adoption reporting
8. Third party fees (mostly to governmental entities)
9. Travel and accommodation expenses

The average range of total costs for adoption from a Convention country in FFY2024 was \$17,500–\$62,263.⁹ Similar data is not federally published for non-Convention adoptions, however, adopters should prepare for a comparable range.

While kinship adopters from the U.S. foster care system can receive financial support such as an adoption subsidy, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and state-specific benefits such as state-sponsored undergraduate tuition coverage,¹⁰

intercountry adoptees are typically excluded from such benefits, making intercountry kinship adoption inaccessible to many. Fortunately, the federal Adoption Tax Credit is available for international adoptions. For adoptions finalized in 2026, the maximum amount a family can receive as credit is \$17,670 per adopted child.¹¹

Tip for adopters: Advocate for your needs with your agency and employer. Some agencies may assist with identifying adoption grants that you could be eligible for, may offer support crafting grant applications, and may offer payment plans on professional services fees.¹² Some employers may offer flexible adoption-based parental leave options or offer reimbursement for some adoption expenses. It is also important to remember that adoption expenses are spread over multiple years, allowing families to save and budget throughout the course of the adoption process.

Tip for professionals: Share information with all families about the federal Adoption Tax Credit, state-specific tax credits, grants, loans, and fundraising opportunities to help offset costs. Ensure that the fee structure is spread across multiple years.

⁸ Contributions are defined under 22 CFR § 96.40(b)(6) as “Any fixed contribution amount, or percentage that prospective adoptive parent(s) will be expected or required to make to child protection or child welfare service programs in the child’s country of origin or in the United States, along with an explanation of the intended use of the transaction and the manner in which the contribution will be recorded and accounted for.”

⁹ Office of Children’s Issues. (2024). *Fiscal year 2024 annual report tab 1A: Table on intercountry adoption*. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs. <https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/NEWadoptionassets/pdfs/Fiscal%20Year%202024%20Annual%20Report%20Tab%201A%20Table%20on%20Intercountry%20Adoption.pdf>

¹⁰ New York State Education Department. (n.d.). *Foster youth college success initiative*. <https://www.nysed.gov/postsecondary-services/foster-youth-college-success-initiative>

¹¹ National Council For Adoption. (2026, January 13). *Adoption Tax Credit questions*. <https://adoptioncouncil.org/article/adoption-tax-credit-questions/>

¹² National Council For Adoption. (n.d.). *How to afford adoption: Financial help, tax credits, adoption grants, and more*. <https://adoptioncouncil.org/financial-resources/>

Legal Uncertainty

Families come to international kinship adoption with profound love and an unwavering commitment to a child in their family whom they know to be in need. However, the outcome of an intercountry adoption can never be guaranteed. A thorough home study assessment must find the kinship adopter is eligible and suitable to adopt, and that finding must be verified and confirmed through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)'s decision on an I-800A or I-600A petition. Additionally, through a separate process, the child must be found in need of intercountry adoption in accordance with both the laws of their country of residence and the laws of the United States. Typically, the criteria of eligibility are different under the two countries' laws, and both countries' definitions of eligibility must be satisfied in order to complete an intercountry adoption.

A key risk in adoptions from non-Convention countries, is the stage at which the child's adoption-based immigration petition is settled. Unlike Convention adoptions where the child's eligibility for immigration is resolved before a legal adoption takes place, in non-Convention adoptions, USCIS will only consider the child's eligibility for immigration as an "orphan"¹³ after the adoption or guardianship order has been issued in the child's country of residence. This is done through the filing of Form I-600, Petition to Classify an Orphan as an Immediate Relative. In the period of April 1-June 30, 2025, USCIS adjudicated 512 I-600 petitions, of which 33% were denied.¹⁴ This evidences the critical importance of ensuring

that proper and complete documentation is gathered that substantiates the child's need and eligibility for intercountry adoption under the guidance of a Hague-accredited adoption service provider. This also means that a kinship adopter must be advised that there may be a multi-year period after the adoption finalization before the child is able to come to the United States, and in that period, they are typically responsible for making suitable care arrangements for the child.

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Tip for adopters: Before beginning any adoption procedures in the child's country of residence, contact [a U.S.-based, Hague-accredited adoption service provider](#). This provider will assess the child's circumstances in consideration of U.S. adoption-based immigration eligibility. Families who complete adoptions in their child's country of residence before contracting with a U.S.-based Hague-accredited adoption service providers face increased risk that the child they adopt will not be eligible to immigrate to the United States as an Orphan or as a Convention Adoptee.

¹³ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *USCIS policy manual: Volume 5, part C, chapter 4 – Eligibility requirements specific to orphans*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-5-part-c-chapter-4>

¹⁴ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *Immigration and citizenship data*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-and-studies/immigration-and-citizenship-data>

Tip for professionals: Provide staff training in the Child Eligibility Determinations (Orphan¹⁵ and Convention Adoptee¹⁶) in accordance with USCIS's Policy Manual.¹⁷ Screen families thoroughly and consult with or refer them to qualified attorneys before accepting a case if the child's eligibility is unclear or if the case may instead be eligible for a different immigration pathway, such as the I-130.

Supporting the Child through the Process

By virtue of the kinship relationship, the adopter and child typically have a long and pre-established relationship as well as ongoing contact throughout the course of the adoption process. This established relationship is associated with more favorable behavioral and mental health outcomes for children and can be a valuable tool for supporting the child through the process until the adoption is finalized and the child is united with their adoptive parent in the United States.¹⁸ A kinship adopter can help a child, if developmentally appropriate, understand the unknown timeframes in adoption. It can be beneficial for kinship adopters to keep a journal about all the steps that they are completing and use that as a tool to speak with the child about the adoption process's complexities, while also reinforcing their unwavering commitment. Kinship adopters should be honest with the child about what is unknown in the process and avoid making false promises about how quickly the adoption may take.

Additionally, there are practical supports that may be accessible while the adoption is in process. For example, the kinship adopter might be allowed to arrange therapeutic services, tutoring, and recreational activities for the child. Kinship adopters might also be allowed to provide for the child's daily care and decide the best placement for the child in-country while the adoption process unfolds. These decisions must be guided appropriately by a Hague-accredited adoption service provider, as there are country-specific laws and procedures as well as federal regulations that must be taken into consideration.

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Tip for adopters: Speak with your Hague-accredited adoption service provider from the beginning of the process about what is allowable under the laws and procedures of the child's country of origin regarding care arrangements for the child until they come to the United States.

¹⁵ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *USCIS policy manual: Volume 5, Part C – Child eligibility determinations (orphan)*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-5-part-c>

¹⁶ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *USCIS policy manual: Volume 5, Part D – Child eligibility determinations (Hague)*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-5-part-d>

¹⁷ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (n.d.). *USCIS policy manual: Volume 5 – Adoptions*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-5>

¹⁸ Lorthridge, J., Reyes, L. M., Rosman, E., & Kaye, S. (2023). Happy, healthy, and needs met: How kinship caregivers define success and wellbeing. *Child Welfare*, 101(4), 153–177. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48758482>

Helpful questions to ask include:

1. 'Can the child be placed with extended kin until the completion of the adoption?'
2. 'Can I arrange for therapy for the child while the adoption procedures unfold?'
3. 'Can I have phone, video, and in-person contact with the child during the course of the adoption process?'
4. 'Can I contribute financially to the child's schooling and daily necessities?'

Please note that the answers to these questions may depend on the child's legal status; for example, if the child is a Ward of the State in their country of origin, the State will likely hold all decision-making on behalf of the child, whereas if a child is living in a family-arranged setting following the death of a parent, the kinship adopter might be allowed input into decisions made with respect to the child.

Tip for professionals: Include discussion and guidance during child-specific training on how kinship adopters can speak with the child about the unknowns in the adoption process, taking into consideration the child's developmental stage. Guide adopters in the ways they can support the child during the adoption process and advocate with in-country authorities for the greatest allowable contact between the adopter and the child over the course of the process.

Supporting the Adopter through the Process

Kinship adopters are often called to adoption right as they are grieving the same loss that brought the child to be in need of adoption. The death or incapacity of the child's biological parent(s) often represents the death or incapacity of the adopter's son, daughter, sibling, cousin, or other close relative. Family members may find it difficult to support the child while they themselves are struggling to process their own grief. In many states, kinship adopters through the U.S. foster care system have access to resources such as the Kinship Navigator Program¹⁹ or Team Decision Making (TDM) meetings²⁰ which enhance the adopter's ability to obtain much needed supports. Without these resources, kinship adopters will require enhanced guidance from adoption professionals on accessing therapeutic services for themselves as they prepare to transition from the role of grandparent, aunt, uncle, or another title, to parent.

Kinship adopters are often called to adoption right as they are grieving the same loss that brought the child to be in need of adoption.

Tip for adopters: Prioritizing self-care during this process is important. If you are struggling to work through your own grief, it may feel overwhelming to also support the child. There is no shame in asking for help; professionals

¹⁹ State of New Jersey Department of Children and Families. (n.d.). Kinship navigator program. <https://www.nj.gov/dcf/families/support/kinship/>

²⁰ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2024). Engaging and supporting kinship caregivers (Part four of family ties: Analysis from a statebystate survey of kinship care policies). <https://www.aecf.org/resources/engaging-and-supporting-kinship-caregivers>

are available to guide you. Ask your adoption professional if you can be connected with other families navigating a similar journey—there is strength in community.

Tip for professionals: In many cultures around the world, it is common practice for children to be raised informally by extended family members. Therefore, the adopter may not fully grasp the necessity for all the adoption-related discussions and regulations. Adoption professionals are encouraged to approach international kinship adoptions with cultural humility and respectfully support adopters as they navigate the complex U.S.-based requirements.

Preparing for Homecoming: Transitioning from Parenting from Afar to Parenting Daily

Kinship adopters may have intimate, firsthand knowledge of the personality, interests, needs, and developmental history of the child they are adopting. Hague-accredited adoption service providers will further prepare kinship adopters for the unique ways in which adoption and the transition from country of birth to country of adoption may impact the child. Adoption service providers are also required to provide pre-adoption training tailored to the known needs and background of

the child.²¹ In kinship adoption, that includes discussion and preparation for the transitional challenges that can arise as roles shift in the family system; a kinship adopter may be transitioning from grandmother to mother, or from uncle to father. That represents a fundamental shift in relational dynamics, and we often see children struggle with that transition, which might look like testing boundaries, acting out, and disrespect—all of which are normal responses when a child has experienced loss. Maintaining connections with the child's former caretaker and significant attachment figures from the child's life is important for their continuity of relationships and can enhance the child's sense of security in their new adoptive home.

[Kinship adoption] represents a fundamental shift in relational dynamics...

In many international kinship adoptions, a child is transitioning from an environment in which they were the racial/ethnic majority to an environment in which the majority of their peers may come from different racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. While kinship adoption typically allows the child to maintain connection to their cultural identity, it does not shield the child from experiences of racism and discrimination.²² These new experiences can be alarming to children in ways that the adopter may be less familiar with. Hague-accredited adoption service

²¹ Intercountry Adoption Accreditation of Agencies and Approval of Persons. (22 C.F.R. § 96.48(c)). (2024). <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-22/chapter-I/subchapter-G/part-96>

²² Lorthridge, J., Reyes, L. M., Rosman, E., & Kaye, S. (2023). Happy, healthy, and needs met: How kinship caregivers define success and wellbeing. *Child Welfare*, 101(4), 153–177. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48758482>

providers therefore have a responsibility to provide pre-adoption preparation to equip kinship adopters in talking with their children about race, racism, and how to advocate in the school system if their child experiences bullying or victimization.

Tip for adopters: The child you are adopting has experienced profound trauma; coming to the United States may re-trigger that trauma as they undergo the new loss of separation from their familiar environment. Anticipate that the child will display more challenging behaviors upon homecoming than they may be displaying in their current environment. Plan to access therapeutic services, and potentially a specialized school setting, even if the child has not previously accessed such care.

Tip for professionals: Where possible, offer to connect families pursuing intercountry kinship adoptions with families who have already completed such adoptions. Community and normalization are important in adoption, and kinship adoptive families need connections to families that mirror their own.²³ Adoption professionals should encourage kinship adopters to foster their community while the adoption process is underway. Whether that is in their faith community or neighborhood or amongst family, coworkers, and friends, kinship adopters will need to lean on community while they are parenting. Building relationships and establishing emergency contacts and response plans in anticipation of a child's arrival will be essential for support, not only for the child, but also for the adoptive parent(s) once the child comes home.

Conclusion

Intercountry kinship adoption sits at the intersection of family commitment and complex international processes. Although it offers an important permanent option for children, the lengthy timelines, costs, and legal uncertainties can make the journey challenging for families. Strong collaboration with a Hague-accredited adoption service provider is essential to guide families through regulatory requirements, prepare them for the emotional realities of a multi-year process, and ensure the child's best interests remain central.

Continued research and data collection are needed to better support families navigating this pathway. However, with thoughtful preparation, ethical guidance, and strong professional support, intercountry kinship adoption can help children who have experienced profound loss find permanency, stability, and connection within their extended families.

²³ Walk Together Adoption. (2024, September 6). *Building connections: The power of community in adoption*. <https://www.walktogetheradoption.org.uk/post/building-connections-the-power-of-community-in-adoption>

Recommended Resources

Department of State Resources

- [Adopting a Relative for Immigration to the United States](#)
 - [Hague Convention Countries](#)
 - [Non-Convention Visa Process](#)
 - [Convention Visa Process](#)
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Directories and Other Resources

- [Center for Excellence in Adoption Services \(CEAS\) Adoption Service Provider Directory](#)
 - [Adoption Professional Directory - NCFA](#)
 - [How to Afford Adoption: Financial Help, Tax Credits, Adoption Grants, and More](#)
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Articles

- [International Kinship and Kinship+ Adoption](#)
- [8 Tips to Ease the Transition of Kinship Adoption](#)
- [The Hidden Hurdles and Benefits of Kinship Care and Adoption](#)
- [Cultural Humility: Practice Principles Handout](#)
- [Kinship Adoptions: Benefits, Challenges, and Practical Considerations](#)

Navigating International Relative Adoption: Guidance for Adoptive Parents and Professionals

About Lauren Jiang, LMSW



Lauren has over 10 years working in intercountry adoption, overseeing program development, casework, and compliance. This has included pre-adoption training and assessment, post-adoption services, and crisis intervention. Lauren oversees the establishment and supervision of Foreign Supervised Provider relationships. Lauren also oversees Spence-Chapin's global humanitarian aid programs, notably Spence-Chapin's Granny Program.

About E. Stefani Moon, MA, TBRI® Practitioner



Stefani has decades of experience in the field of adoption, in both domestic and international adoption. Currently, Stefani provides clinical services pre- and post-adoption to families adopting internationally. She crafts and delivers child-specific and country-specific training for all kinship cases. Stefani holds regular oversight of the work of Foreign Supervised Providers (FSPs). Stefani has provided Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) training to representatives from a Central Authority, FSPs, and childcare staff. As an adjunct instructor at Rutgers University, she has provided CEU trainings to hundreds of professionals on adoption themes.

About Jane Krol



Jane is the Manager of International Programs at Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children where she guides prospective adoptive families—particularly those adopting through kinship and referral-based pathways—through every stage of the process, including home study, dossier preparation, immigration filings, and post-placement requirements. By working closely with in-country partners, relevant state, country, and governing authorities, she helps families navigate complex regulatory requirements to ensure the safety, well-being, and ethical permanency of children. Jane earned her B.A. in Sociology and Anthropology from Ursinus College, and her work is grounded with a deep commitment to elevating the voices and best interests of children and families worldwide.

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