A Look at the Experience of Adopting a Child

Deciding to expand a family by adopting a child is one of the most rewarding choices adoptive parents will ever make. Although adoption can be extremely rewarding for parents, the adoption process can be a very intense experience, as adoptive parents endure countless measures for officials to determine if they’re prepared to raise a child.

In all but close relative situations, the adoptive parents are required to have a home study that assesses whether they are fit to adopt a child, says Jeanne T. Tate, attorney and founder of the Jeanne T. Tate, P.A, an adoption law firm with offices in Tampa, Orlando, and Naples, Florida.

She says a home study has many components including the review of documents such as tax returns, performing criminal background checks, verification of employment, checking the physical environment and safety of the home, and much more.

All adoptive parents must undergo a home study, typically conducted by adoption agencies, but when it comes to the actual adoption process, circumstances vary according to each situation, she says.

As each adoption is an individual situation, Tate says it’s difficult to put labels such as ‘closed’ or ‘open’ adoption on them.

“It’s very important that the wishes of the birth parents as well as the wishes of the adoptive parents mesh,” Tate says.

She says it is very common for birth parents to want some sense of an open adoption, where they are able to receive updates and photographs of the child.

Having any type of open adoption often makes adoptive parents nervous, she says, because they’re afraid the birth parents will see pictures of the child and regret their decision to place them for adoption, but that is not really the case.

“I can tell you from 30 years of experience, it validates their decision to place the child for adoption — a reaffirmation,” Tate says.

Though not essential, Tate says most adoptive parents will meet the birth parents either before the baby is born or at the hospital. She says the meeting typically has a sense of anonymity, with only first names exchanged.

Meetings between the birth parents and the adoptive parents are organized by adoption agencies or adoption attorneys to keep personal information exchanged between the two parties at a minimum.

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The responsibilities of an attorney during the adoption process vary according to state laws and each individual situation.

“The role of an attorney takes many facets,” Tate says. “In some states it can be a placing entity. In other states the attorney represents the adoptive parents, and does all the legal work for the adoption.”

Attorneys also commonly serve as counsel for international and domestic adoptions, Tate says.

There’s also many ways for attorneys in the public sector to get involved in the adoption process, including representing a guardian, birth parent, or even the child, she says.

An adoption attorney can also help adoptive parents to ensure their legal rights are protected. For example, Tate says adoptive parents can absolutely protect themselves from birthparents who give their child up for adoption, then change their minds.
“There are not many guarantees in life but we can all take precautions from a scamming birth mother from taking advantage of the adoptive parents,” Tate says.

Tate recommends that adoptive parents hire an attorney from the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, the leaders in the field in their respective states, to represent them in the adoption process.

**Adult Adoption**

While not nearly as common as adopting a baby, adult adoption is another legal process in family law courts.

Tate says the adult adoption process is nothing like the procedure for adopting a child.

“It’s a completely different animal than an infant adoption,” Tate says. “In an adult adoption the only person who has to consent is the adopted adult.”

She says the parents of the adult must be notified of the adoption, but they don’t have the right to derail it. There are many reason for choosing an adult adoption, Tate says.

Some people choose to adopt an adult because the person has been like a member of the family and their parents aren’t around. Others choose to adopt for inheritance purposes, immigration reasons, and even to codify a same-sex relationship, so one partner is able to have the benefits that come from that relationship.

A 2011 MSNBC article, *Picking Your Parents: Adult Adoption Creates New Bond*, notes that many adult adoptions occur from foster parents adopting long-time foster children who lived with them for many years during their childhood. The foster child feels a strong bond with the foster parents and both parties seek to legalize the relationship to make them an official part of the family.

**Psychological Effects of Adopting a Child**

Adopting a child is an emotional experience for everyone, including the adoptive parents. When the day they get to hold their baby in their arms for the first time finally arrives, they are often overwhelmed with emotions.

Dr. Denny Cecil-Van Den Heuvel, LMHC, LMFT, LPC, NCC, program director for Mental Health Counseling at South University, West Palm Beach, says relief is the most common emotion that adoptive parents experience, as many have endured potential adoptions that have not worked out due to a parent changing their mind, grandparents seeking custody, etc., causing them to have to give the child back before the adoption process is complete.

“Other emotions may include joy, gratitude, fear of being good enough parents, and fear someone will take the child away,” she says. “These emotions could lead to behaviors such as hovering, over-controlling of the child’s world and life choices, etc.”

Children can still experience a number of emotional problems stemming from their adoption, even when adopted at an early age.

The number one emotional issue for children who have not attached appropriately with a caregiver at an early age is reactive attachment disorder, Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says.

There are a number of treatments available for this disorder, including equestrian therapy and using dolphins to build trust, Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says, but she believes every child is different and response to treatment modalities is on an individual basis.

“One treatment I liked hearing about was having the mother and adoptive child spend nine weeks together for the entire time, except for bathroom breaks and showering, where the mother coos and speaks to the child in a very intense and intentful manner, “ Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says. “A young boy of 12 talked
about going through that experience with his adoptive mother and even shared that at first he hated it and thought it was dumb and degrading but somewhere in the nine weeks, something simply flipped for him and he knew she would be there for him no matter what and she loved him. He said he could not define the moment but felt the shift in his beliefs.

Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says age at the time of adoption definitely has an impact on the effects of the process on the child.

“The older the child, the more life experiences influence the child,” she says. “Unfortunately, you hear of the negative experiences where children are moved from foster home to foster home due to state regulations on the length of stay at these homes. The feeling of love and belongingness is essential to the growth of a child.”

If a child is constantly uprooted and moved to new environments, it will be difficult to attach and grow, Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says.

Even when a child is adopted into a home with a new family, it can be difficult to feel like they fit in.

Cecil-Van Den Heuvel says adoptive parents can help their child adjust to their new life by not overcompensating for them, being inclusive, giving the child time to adjust and integrate on their own timeline, providing structure, building trust by keeping their word, and making sure the child knows what to expect and understands their own responsibilities.