

Choosing an Adoption Agency

By Dale Eldridge, LICSW, BCD

For many people, the initial trips to an adoption agency are marked by feelings of sad resignation. Most prospective parents have grown up in our culture with the dream of finding their life partner and giving birth to children. While many exceptions exist, most people become adoptive parents following the loss of that long held dream. Either infertility, the lack of a suitable partner or both generally lead to this loss. The impact varies for different people, but as with any significant loss it is usually important to take time to grieve before moving on to the next steps. Exploring adoption agencies is one effective way to decide on the most appropriate next steps. Some people will ultimately decide to live childfree or to pursue donor egg or surrogacy. Many others will go on to adopt. To make a well-informed decision, it is a good idea to gather reliable information about your options. Then you can better assess how well each option will fit your altered life plan.

Assessing the adoption options can feel very daunting. There are a variety of decisions to make: infant or older child; international or domestic adoption; public or private agency; traditional agency placement or parent identified adoption. And that is just the beginning! Ultimately, you need to reflect carefully to decide how flexible you can be (or can become) about issues of openness in adoption, the child's ethnic background, medical history and the degree of legal risk you find tolerable. The decisions you make will be highly personal ones. No one can dictate how open or flexible you should be about any of these issues. Your ideas will evolve over time, and hopefully, the agency you select will become a resource for you, educating you about your choices, respecting your views and supporting your evolving decisions.

There is good news and bad news about adopting as a resident of Massachusetts, one of the few remaining "agency states." Only licensed adoption agencies are permitted to facilitate adoptions in this state. In most other states, private adoptions are generally facilitated by attorneys, who are not subject to the clinical and ethical practice standards that govern agencies. The good news is that the agency affords you a level of protection not generally built into the process in most states, where adoption practice is largely unregulated, **and** there are many agencies to choose from. The bad news is that there are many agencies to choose from. This can feel a bit bewildering when one is trying to narrow the options.

In assessing the suitability of an agency, there are objective and subjective issues to consider. It is very important to determine the level of staff experience and expertise by asking questions about the staff's credentials as well as the overall history of the program. Speak with someone at the Massachusetts Office of Early Education and Care to see if any complaints have been lodged against an agency you are considering.

Checking client references is a good way to learn about how it feels to work with a particular agency. Choose a program where you feel the staff is knowledgeable, competent, attentive, and accessible.

An agency's overall philosophy will also be important to you. Some agencies are more progressive and inclusive than others. For example, what are the agency's policies about the age of the parents, single parenting, or same sex parents? The amount of education for pre-adoptive parents is an indicator of the agency's commitment to helping clients become the best adoptive parents they can be. It also reflects the agency's commitment to children, as they are the ones who benefit from parent preparation. Post-adoptive parenting support is another indicator of agency values.

In the beginning, if you know what type of adoption you want to pursue, that helps narrow your options. Some agencies only facilitate domestic adoptions. Others only work with international adoptions, and some provide both services. Many people do not make that determination until they are engaged in the home study process, and for them it is important to work with an agency that offers both types of adoptions.

Within the field of international adoptions, some agencies have their own overseas programs. Others work in partnership with outside international placement agencies. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, and it is helpful to learn about them to decide the best approach for you.

For domestic adoptions, some agencies offer only traditional agency placements. Others specialize in parent-identified adoptions, and some do both. Again, you need to learn as much as you can about these options to make the best choice for yourself.

Agency fees vary depending upon the type of adoption and the services provided before, during and after that process. Potential additional expenses include legal fees, local agency fees, birth parent expenses, domestic travel, or international travel and program costs. The specifics of what you will actually be paying for are very important when evaluating agency fees.

If you might be open to parenting a child who is in state custody, there are many children, often legally free for adoption, who need permanent, loving homes. If you feel able to parent an older child, or a sibling group, this may be a good option for you. Adoptions of these waiting children are accomplished through the Department of Children and Families or a DCF contracted agency. Bear in mind that these children are likely to have some special needs. This can mean many different things, depending on the child's circumstances. While the challenges can be great, so too can be the rewards.

Once you have assessed the viability of a program in terms of staff experience and expertise, their accessibility, commitment to education and child welfare, overall philosophy, and compatibility in terms of the type of adoption you seek, there remains

the question of how good a fit a given agency is for you. This assessment should include all the aforementioned elements.

In addition, you may want to pay attention to pure “chemistry” to guide you in your assessment. Are you comfortable with the professional staff of a particular agency? Are they knowledgeable? Are they experienced? Are they trustworthy? How do you think you will feel about having them play a critical role in your life at a very vulnerable time? Although, as mentioned earlier, it can feel overwhelming to have so many choices, there is good news in that as well. With such a rich variety of options, you are very likely to find an agency that feels right to you.

Most agencies offer free informational groups or individual consultations. Take the time to visit several and be sure to ask plenty of questions. When making these critical decisions, you should select a program where you feel that you will be respected and supported throughout the process.

I wish you the very best of luck as you embark on the course that will lead you to becoming parents by adoption.