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Getting Started in Adoption

One Social Worker's View of the Homestudy

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As an adoptive parent who has lived through a homestudy and as a social worker who has conducted them, I am delighted to share some of my thoughts about the homestudy process. I am convinced that it is one of the most misunderstood aspects of adoption. Surrounded by myths and horror stories, it is too often viewed by prospective adoptive parents as a tortuous ordeal perpetrated by social workers.

I remember well my feelings when I was told that my husband and I would have to submit to a homestudy in order to adopt. I thought it was inconvenient at the least, and certainly intrusive, but the social worker in me was curious to know what it was. Like most people who come to this point, I certainly didn't view it as the opportunity that it proved to be. Twenty years later, I can't imagine going into adoption without the preparation that the homestudy process provided.

Today, as a social worker practicing in the field of adoption, I feel it is terribly important for prospective adoptive parents to understand the purpose of the homestudy in order to take advantage of the opportunity that it presents. While I cannot speak to the procedures and perspective of all agencies or social workers, I can describe how I view the process.

The homestudy is a series of meetings with the prospective parents, together as a couple and/or individually, to get to know them and to assist them in preparing to become parents through adoption. Office interviews as well as small group sessions are used. At least one of the sessions takes place in the home. Various documents such as autobiographies, clearances, and letters from references augment the face-to-face contacts.

Since each family is different, each homestudy is different. There is no structured set of questions, but a wide range of topics that are discussed. Participants bring to the exchange those concerns and feelings which are uniquely theirs as they contemplate this important step in their lives. Depending on the individual situation, the homestudy generally takes two to three months, including the time needed for references to respond by letter. When the interviews and paperwork are completed, a written document-- the homestudy --- is prepared for the courts and/ or the overseas agency. This document describes the family, touching on such things as childhood and family, education and employment experience, marriage (in some cases), values, and a description of the child they hope to adopt.

While the homestudy process can cover many different topics, for couples, almost all discussions begin with the pain of infertility, the loss of the real or imagined "dream child," the frustration and anger, the profound sense of loss of control that has shadowed their life together. The acceptance of infertility and the physical and emotional readiness to pursue adoption are extremely important to the joyful anticipation of this venture and their future handling of their child's adoption questions. Early in the process, individuals will often share that they despair of ever reaching this mystical point of readiness, but when it happens, they move into the adoption process freely and joyfully.

We have learned from parents, adult adoptees, and birthparents who have lived adoption that adoption is not an event but a process which begins with the preparation for placement and continues throughout their lives. While being the parent of a child who is adopted is in most ways just like being the parent of a biological child, there are differences.

Educating and preparing couples to understand the life-long issues which adoption presents, as well as to understand those issues which pertain to all parenting no matter what the process, is a very important function of the homestudy. It is here that the agency can share its experience gained from many other adoptions to help prospective parents address issues which they might not have considered on their own. The value of doing this early in the parenting process is that they can make informed decisions and develop sensitivity to adoption which will enable them to help their child with these issues.

It is the evaluative component of the homestudy, however, which makes most applicants nervous. Being painfully aware of the importance of the assessment of the social worker to their future, they imagine that he or she subscribes to an unreasonable list of specific characteristics that must be present if they are to be "allowed" to adopt. Forgetting that the social worker's role is that of a facilitator in the adoption process, they worry about every comment, every look, every dust ball at the home visit. They clean and clean some more, forgetting that the social worker probably left his or her own home in less than ideal condition to keep the appointment.

Candidates often assume that the social worker is looking for perfection. In fact, I am uneasy when I encounter what appears to be perfection -- uneasy because I am not perfect, nor is anyone I know -- uneasy because the child who will be adopted is not perfect, and the expectation of perfection is unrealistic. The task of rearing a child, like any other relationship, requires the flexibility to work with the less-than-ideal world of real people.

Applicants almost always ask me if they should be honest in a homestudy. After all, the social worker only knows what he or she is told. I feel strongly that everyone can really gain from the homestudy process by simply being themselves- by sharing their concerns, their doubts, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

Prospective parents will benefit because they will learn more about themselves and about each other, thus being in a better position to move into their new roles as parents. The social worker will also know them as they really are and be in a better position to represent them and be supportive throughout the adoption process. At its best, the homestudy is a two-way street, a working, educational process based on reality and openness.

The truth is that every social worker should take his or her responsibility seriously, as would anyone who is being asked to make a decision that will affect the future well-being of a child. However, there is no hidden agenda here. In evaluating a potential adoptive home we need to assure that several basic elements are present: namely, a stable home environment, the emotional and financial resources to rear a child, realistic expectations about adoption, a strong marital relationship if married, and a genuine desire to be parents.

Hopefully, people will use the homestudy to look at themselves and their lives -- especially the tough times -- to understand how they work and how they cope. They should think through how it might feel to grow up adopted, and how it might feel to place a child for adoption. They should learn about the kinds of children who are in need of homes and carefully consider factors -- age, race, and medical conditions -- that they feel they could handle in a child they hope

to parent. They should begin to anticipate the role that their child's birthparents will play in their family's life, in reality as well as in fantasy. This process of broadening one's thinking is enhanced by talking to other parents who have adopted, to birthparents, and to adopted adults to hear about the myriad ways adoption plays out in real life.

I once had clients tell me at the end of their homestudy that they had shared much of their experiences with friends who were expecting a biological child. Their friends had remarked that they wished that they had had the chance to go through a homestudy as preparation for becoming parents! I only wish more people could put aside their anxiety and relax enough to view the homestudy process not as an ordeal to be dreaded, but as an opportunity to prepare themselves for parenthood.

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