

## Final Preparations: Getting Yourself & Your Child Ready for Adoption Finalization

Many parents eagerly await their child's adoption day for months or even years. While you tend to all of the details and logistics for the big day, you may want to spend some time getting yourself and your child ready for all of the emotions that might come up. No matter the specific details of your adoption journey, this tip sheet will help you know what to expect and how to prepare as a family for this monumental occasion.

### Having the Talk: What Adoption Means

A first step in preparing children for adoption is talking to them about what adoption means for them. Even if the child has been a part of your family for an extended period of time, an adoption finalization is still a transition for that child with life-long implications. You may need to help younger children in particular understand what adoption is, and why it happens, in a way that does not vilify birth parents or give the child responsibility for removal from the family of origin. This will most likely involve answering tough questions or providing clarification on events the child has experienced. It's important to do so in an honest, open, and positive way.

For example, if there were addiction or mental health issues that brought the child into care, you can speak about those topics in a way that separates the illness from the

character of the person. You might explain that the illness created circumstances that prevented the parent or caregiver from providing the deserved nurturing care—and offer reassurance that you can provide that care.

Recognize, too, that this is not a “one and done” conversation. These discussions may be ongoing over the course of your child's life. In fact, we recommend that you initiate them in order to establish a safe environment for your child to express any emotions they might have around this topic.



### Expressing Feelings about Finalization

It is also important to help your child express how they feel about adoption finalization and let them know that their feelings are normal and valid, whatever they may be. Know that a wide variety of emotions and feelings may surface—and try not to take any of it personally. For your child, adoption may feel like a betrayal of their birth family or trigger anxiety about the well-being of parents or siblings. Look for activities that allow your child the opportunity to express their fears, other strong emotions, or misconceptions about adoption in a non-threatening way. This also offers you an opportunity to provide reassurance and validation in this time of grief and loss. Activities may include role-playing the adoption using stuffed animals

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or reading adoption-themed children's books. (See the list at end of this tip sheet.)

It's important to remember that adoption is a loss for your child and they will experience the stages of grief. It's also good to remember that sometimes loss is an experience children cannot verbalize. Be on the lookout for behaviors that may indicate your child is grieving. These may not look similar to adult grieving behaviors. For example, your child may be angry, act out, or fight to gain control of every aspect of their world. This profound loss may be something your child needs professional help to heal from.

For the older child, even if they have expressed a desire to be adopted, finalization still means great loss. While you may view finalization as an outcome, for your child, it is a lifelong process of trying to understand past experiences, developing an identity as an adopted person, and reframing familial relationships. It's vitally important that you validate your child's feelings, provide comfort, offer reassurance, and stay engaged with any services your child needs. While there may be a temptation move forward with a "normal" life post adoption and discontinue services, your child may need help then, more than ever, in coping with their loss.

### **Maintaining Connections**

Perhaps one of the most powerful things you can do to prepare a child for adoption finalization is maintain good relationships with significant people in the child's life—



whether that means birth parents, siblings, extended family, or close friends—and provide reassurance that those relationships will continue. Again, you may worry that maintaining contact with biological family or even past foster parents will be reminders of a painful time in the child's life and prolong the healing process. In fact, just the opposite is true. As long as relationships remain healthy, maintaining contact with significant people in the child's life will provide comfort and reassurance and aid in healing.

### **Name Change**

Another important matter of consideration in preparation for adoption is whether or not the child's name will change at finalization. Every child, and adoptive parent for that matter, may have widely differing views about a change in name. For some children and youth, changing a first and/or last name can signal a sense of permanence and security. For others—even children who are excited about the adoption process as a whole—a name change may be difficult for a variety of reasons. For example, a child's name is often one of the only remaining links to their biological family, and a name change may bring up feelings of disconnection or disloyalty. Others may worry that a name change will be something they will need to explain at school or in other situations where they don't want others to know about their adoption. Because of this, it is crucial for the child to be involved in this decision in a developmentally appropriate way.

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## Getting Ready for Adoption Day

Having an understanding of what will occur on adoption finalization day is important for parents as well as for children.

Children may associate a judge and/or courthouse with punishment or previous traumatic experiences, so it is important to have a conversation about the meaning of adoption finalization. Older children who spent time in foster care may recall other court hearings, so be sure to differentiate between those hearings and the adoption finalization. You may want to let your child know that the judge may ask them some questions, such as, “How old are you?” or “How do you feel about being adopted?” Knowing what to expect can take much of the anxiety out of the day.

Many adoptive parents have shared that they weren't prepared for all the emotions they felt on adoption day. One family shared, “We waited four long years for my son's adoption day. I was certain it would be the happiest day of my life, to finally be able to breathe knowing he would never have to worry about being moved again. When the hearing ended, an indescribable sorrow came over me. In the midst of the celebrating I was unexpectedly struck by the realization that although this was a joyous occasion for our family, that joy came with great loss for not only my son but his birth family as well. The finalization ended any hopes my son had of ever returning to his birth family.”

Just as it is normal for children to have a mix of conflicting emotions on adoption day, adoptive parents may find themselves with a mix of emotions as well. It's not uncommon for some families to schedule any

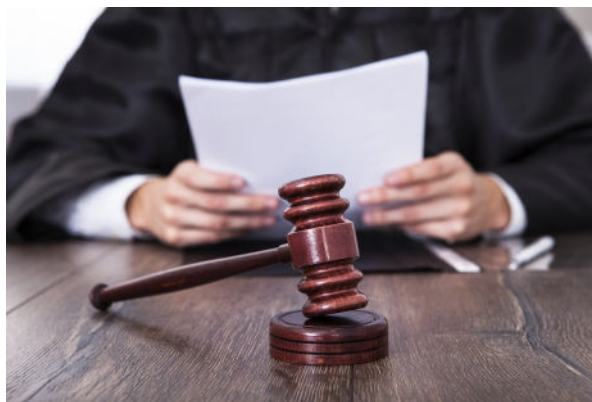
celebrations a few days after the actual adoption hearing date to allow for time to process all the emotions.

## What to Expect at the Finalization Hearing

An adoption finalization takes place in a courthouse and provides adoptive parent(s) with permanent, legal custody of a child. While every situation is different, most adoption finalization hearings are brief (about five-ten minutes) and typically involve the adoptive parent(s), the child who is to be adopted, the child's social worker, an attorney or guardian ad litem, the judge, and possibly other professionals. Family and friends are usually allowed in the courtroom as well and can be a great help in providing emotional support and documenting the day with photos or videos of the hearing. During an adoption finalization hearing, the judge may ask questions such as, “Why do you want to adopt?” or “Are you financially capable of caring for this child?” These kinds of questions are meant to ensure that

your home is a stable and loving place for the child and that you understand that adoption is a lifelong commitment. In addition to the formal legal proceedings, many judges will also take a photo with your family or let your child sit in their chair and bang the gavel; however, you may need to ask ahead of time if any of these options are possibilities. These little extra special touches can add a great memory to an already exciting day.

At the finalization hearing, you will receive an adoption decree. This document signifies that the adoption is final, ensures that all former parents' rights are terminated, and decrees that the adoptive parents assume legal responsibility for the child. You will



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also be sent a new birth certificate for your child, which has the adoptive parent(s) listed as the “natural parents.”

### Life after Finalization

No matter how your family views adoption day or chooses to celebrate it, we congratulate you on choosing adoption to build your family. Adoption is a lifelong journey, and adoption finalization does not signal the end of this journey—it is really just the beginning. Seek out other adoptive families and post-adoption resources. These resources may include training events specific to adoptive families, get-togethers with other adoptive families, newsletters with up-to-date adoption stories and information, access to books and other resources about parenting an adopted child or a child with special needs, and/or referral to local resources (including support groups, adoption-competent therapists, etc.). We encourage you to develop relationships with other adoptive families and reach out to the Wisconsin Family Connections Center if you are ever in need of support.



## Resources

### Additional Coalition Resource

- [Touchpoints: Preparing Children for Transitions](#)

### Tip Sheets

- [Empowering Your Children to Share Their Adoption Stories](#)
- [Talking to Your Children about Their Birth Parents](#)
- [Twenty Ideas for Keeping Connections to Racial and Cultural Identity](#)
- [Life Books: A Lifelong Priceless Treasure](#)

### From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Creating Ceremonies—Innovative Ways to Meet Adoption Challenges*, by Cheryl A. Lieberman, Rhea K. Bufferd
- *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*, by Beth O’Malley
- *Adoption Lifebook: A Bridge to Your Child’s Beginnings*, by Cindy Probst
- *Happy Adoption Day!*, by John McCutcheon
- *Welcome Home, Forever Child: A Celebration of Children Adopted as Toddlers, Preschoolers, and Beyond*, by Christine Mitchell
- *The Mulberry Bird: Story of an Adoption*, by Anne Brodzinsky
- *A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza
- *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis
- *Through Moon and Stars and Night Skies*, by Ann Turner
- *Rosie’s Family: An Adoption Story*, by Lori Rosove
- *We Belong Together: A Book about Adoption and Families*, by Todd Parr

### Additional Resources

- [What to Expect During Your Adoption Finalization](#)
- [Helping Your Foster Child Transition to Your Adopted Child](#)