

BASICS OF ADOPTION HOME STUDIES

The purpose of the home study is to document for the courts a number of things about the prospective adoptive parent(s) and their home. This includes: readiness to parent, their physical and mental health, marital and family status, the suitability of the home for a child, ability to financially support a child, history of child abuse or neglect, and criminal record. In addition, the home study will include information on any previous home studies. Each state and foreign country have their own regulations as to who can conduct a home study, what needs to be included in the report, and laws on who can and cannot adopt. Within these guidelines each social worker is free to develop their own personal style.

The home study evaluates the prospective parent's ability to parent a specific type of child --age, sex, multiple children, special needs, medical issues, and race (if you plan to adopt outside of your race). Thus your social worker needs to know from the beginning what situations and countries you are open to adopt. If you are in the position to accept the placement of twins and the home study was written with approval for a single child you may not be able to adopt the twins. The home study report concludes with a recommendation to adopt a child or children with specific characteristics or a non-recommendation to adopt. If there are adults other than the prospective adoptive parents living in the home they will need to be part of the home study process. In addition, any children currently living in the home would be part of the home study process. Also international adoptions for Hague Treaty ratified countries must have a social worker with Hague specific training to complete their home study.

Home studies are usually not as judgmental as this might seem. Social workers are usually sensitive to prospective parents and attempt to make it seem more like a conversation and not an interrogation. The trend since the 1990s is for the social worker to go beyond asking background information and to use the time to educate future parents about the unique issues of adoptive families. For example a social worker might discuss what it would be like to be a multiracial family for a person who is adopting of a different ethnicity or race. The social worker might discuss how to talk about adoption to your child. This is meant to be an informative discussion. Prospective parents should not expect to have all the answers. Use the interview process to ask questions you may have about adoption, being an adoptive family, traveling to adopt, adoption resources, what the adjustment period will be like and more.

A quality home study is conducted over several hours and should be done in more than one meeting. At least one interview will be in the home and include a tour of the home. The tour of the home is to evaluate its suitability and safety for a child. It is not a white glove test for cleanliness or to see how fancy your home is. It is not unusual for a couple to be interviewed separately for part of the home study process. The names and

addresses for references, verification of income, and statement from the prospective parents' physician stating you are physically fit to raise a child will probably be requested.

The interviews will include questions that are factual in nature such as: how old you are, where you were born, general health information, financial ability to support a child, level of education, interests, description of extended family, employment, relationships with family members, religion, experiences with children. For couples, information on how you met, how long you have been married and how infertility was resolved will most likely be asked. Also couples might be asked: What do you think are positive and negative attributes about your spouse? How would you describe your marriage? Be prepared to answer questions about previous marriages and other children. Subjective questions will most likely include: Why do you want to be a parent? What about the family that you grew up in would you want or not want for your own family? Expect questions on the level of post placement openness with the birth family you are comfortable with and if you plan to tell your child they are adopted. You will be asked if you have ever been convicted of a crime or convicted of child abuse.

Background checks will be done on criminal records and child abuse. It is not wise to be deceptive or dishonest in the interviews or documents you provided. If the social worker notices inconsistencies or obvious deception it could harm your chances on a positive recommendation. It is better to explain the context of which something negative occurred and talk about how you learned from that experience. If you have something in your background that is of concern --- criminal record, psychiatric treatment, medical illness --- your social worker will probably ask you details about the situation/condition, if you are at a better place now, how you resolved your problems and what resources are available to you. The social worker or the agency may ask for additional proof (statement from physician, therapist, or psychological testing) that you are indeed in a position to successfully parent a child. The state laws & foreign country establish the laws that qualify you or disqualify you to adopt a child. You are often allowed to see the home study report prior to submission to court. If you disagree with the recommendation or there is a factual error in the report you may be able to attach an addendum to the home study prior to its submission to court. Your openness or lack of openness in the interview process will be included in the home study. If additional interview time is required to complete a thorough background review you may be charged by the social worker or agency to pay an additional fee.

Keep in mind that the courts require your home study to be current. In NYS your home study will need to be updated after 18 months. Thus you may not want to start your home study until you are ready to start your adoption application. If anything significant changes: job, home location, medical condition you are required to inform your social worker so your home study can be updated.

For private placement adoption you will be able to choose the social worker to conduct the home study. Some out-of-town adoption agencies will also allow you to choose a local social worker. Once your child is in your home a post placement investigation will need to be done by the social worker to document how your child is doing for the courts. The post placement interview(s) may or may not be done by the same social worker that did the initial home study.

Questions to ask a social worker prior to arranging an interview include the following:

- Are you a licensed certified social worker, LCSW? NYS does not require a social worker to be a LCSW for an independent adoption home study, but other states, countries or agencies may. It is best to use a LCSW in the event your plans change and you decide to use an agency or different state or country. Call NYS Department of Education to verify a social worker is certified in NYS.
- Do you have Hague Training to conduct a home study for a Hague Country?
- How much will the home study cost? Private practice social workers usually charge less for a home study than does an agency.
- How many interviews are usually done? How many are in the home?
- Will the social worker use some of the time to talk about how adoptive families are different from biological families? A social worker should be adoption sensitive. Remember adoptive families are different from biological families and adoption professionals should not encourage an adoptive family to deny those aspects. Research shows that adoptive children do best when they know information about their birthparents and can talk about being adopted with their parents.
- How long has the social worker been conducting home studies?
- Will you be able to preview the home study prior to submission to court to check for factual errors?
- Will the social worker be willing to update the home study at a later date if needed?

Adoption issues are rarely included in course work at colleges. Social workers usually learn about adoption by reading, continuing education and other job related experiences. It is best to use a social worker that specializes in adoption issues.