

How to Make the Wait for Your Child Easier to Bear - by Deborah McCurdy

When your home study is approved by your local adoption agency and your documents are mailed to your chosen placement agency, you may go through a difficult time. Most adoptive parents start out with a mixture of eager anticipation and fear that something will go wrong. For many people, hope tends to give way to discouragement and occasional despair as the wait lengthens. Even after your child is chosen for you, you may feel depressed and anxious because he must remain in the care of other people until pre-adoption procedures are completed. There is often an intense feeling of frustration at not being able to control the adoption process personally. Since I have experienced these feelings myself and have seen them often in other adoptive parents, I offer the following suggestions to help you endure the wait. (You may want to post them where you'll see them often!)

Expect some frustrations and delays as a normal part of the adoption process. This applies whether you are working with a U.S.-based agency or a foreign source. There is really no way of accurately predicting how long you will wait for your child. Placement agencies give estimates often with reluctance since adoptive parents expect this. However, these estimates are only educated guesses, or projections based on how long people have waited who applied some time ago and are now receiving their children. Unfortunately, even the most promising adoption programs can encounter unexpected setbacks at any time during the wait. There may be delays due to changes in regulations, slowdowns in the courts, a marked increase in applicants, or the introduction of new procedures. Ask the placement agency for the probable maximum wait they would anticipate and focus on that time and beyond, rather than expecting the shortest possible time. Curiously, the wait should prove somewhat easier if you expect it to be a long one (while realizing that you might be pleasantly surprised).

Don't fight your hope. Discouragement is especially common in those who have had past disappointments in trying to conceive or adopt. Something seems to happen during the wait that I call "fighting hope. The adoptive parents may start out with confidence that the adoption will work out fairly quickly and easily, but then the delays and frustrations that are common in adoption come their way. Whether or not a child has been assigned, the parents start to despair. In some cases, it seems as though they are trying to protect themselves from another disappointment by refusing to let themselves hope that the adoption will work out. If you find yourself becoming angry and pessimistic, or if you begin to feel that you will never get your child, ask yourself if you could be fighting and defeating your own hope. Then remind yourself that delays are normal, and that nothing can stop you from adopting eventually if you refuse to give up!

Think of your placement agency as a gate through the wall of paperwork and procedures that separate you from your child, rather than as a part of that wall. Although the agency is enabling you to obtain your child, anxiety causes some waiting parents to perceive the agency in the opposite way, as part of the system keeping them from their child. When this happens, the parents' criticisms or complaints can hurt the agency staff

and create antagonism. It is very natural for people to be angry when parenthood has already been delayed through infertility, so anger felt toward the placement agency (because of further delays) may be misdirected. Placement agencies work very hard with our own authorities and foreign courts to expedite each adoption, since the process is a complex one. It is often impossible to communicate clearly the reasons for delays or complications over barriers of distance, language, and culture. Dedicated agency directors generally make tremendous sacrifices of their own time and resources to keep their programs going despite unexpected changes in regulations or procedures in foreign countries. When you experience disappointment, your pain is their pain. They get discouraged, too, and they need your understanding and patience. It is not unusual for parents to feel at times that their agency let them down, no matter what agency they have chosen. However, it helps a lot if you can understand that delays and setbacks are beyond the agency's control and often beyond anyone's control.

Stay committed to your agency and to your child. Once parents have carefully selected a placement agency, they need to trust it to do its best to arrange their child's adoption on its own. Their understandable desire to be in control needs to be suspended for a time. The agency and its foreign representatives are the ones that are closest to the situation: parents need to let them determine what can and cannot be done to expedite the adoption. For instance, the agency cannot pressure its overseas representative or the foreign court to speed things up; in most countries this is counterproductive. Nor can the agency insist on the frequent progress reports from overseas that parents would love to have. (Short-staffed foreign agencies and adoption facilitators generally need to direct their energies to caring for many children and processing as many adoptions as possible.)

Once you accept a particular child (after receiving whatever limited medical information is available), think of that child as yours, just as if he or she had been born to you. The agency cannot guarantee that the child will arrive free of problems, any more than an obstetrician can guarantee that any baby will be born free of birth defects or a difficult personality. Becoming a parent involves taking these risks. Once the legal process is under way to make the child yours, you and the agency have both made a commitment. Parents are expected to honor this commitment unless the child turns out to have a serious problem that they cannot handle. Similarly, the agency commits itself to doing everything in its power to complete an adoption although parents must prepare themselves for the possibility of losing a child that is assigned to them. (Another will be referred to them if this happens.)

Because of unexpected delays, a child may arrive months older than the parents had planned on. Some parents worry about this so much that they may be tempted to withdraw from the adoption. However, research has shown that most children make an excellent adjustment to loving adoptive parents, given time and patience, even though they may have originally bonded to someone else. It is encouraging to read the magazine *Adoptive Families* (available from Adoptive Families of America; see "Newsletters" in this Report). Here you will find pictures of beautiful, smiling children and will be made aware of the trials that their adoptive parents went through before they came. The happy ending is there for all to see!

Discuss your feelings with your local agency and with those who have adopted. Your local home study agency, which often is not the agency handling the placement, may be a good re- source for helping you endure the wait. (You may feel freer to vent your anger and frustration at the process in the presence of a social worker who knows you well and is not an employee of the agency processing your adoption.) If your home study agency is also serving as your placement agency, you can certainly express your concerns and your distress while clarifying to the agency staff that you are not blaming them for delays or disappointments over which they have no control. If you feel an impulse to withdraw from your adoption, explore this with your social worker. It may rep- resent a desperate attempt to take control and end the uncertainty and sense of powerlessness that go with your situation. It may help a lot to talk to other adoptive parents who have successfully weathered a difficult wait. Locate a local adoptive parents group: its members should support you.

Give yourself some enjoyable new projects to take your mind off your worries. Furnish the nursery, study Spanish from cassettes, and do something entirely unrelated to the adoption. Choose things that are fun to do together that you may not have time for after the baby comes. If you take a second honeymoon, be sure to let the placement agency know the dates you'll be away and your vacation phone numbers.

Think about what you'd do if the worst possible thing happened. First of all, what is the worst possible outcome? At our lowest ebb, we imagine that we might not get our child at all. However, I do not think that this is a realistic fear. In twelve years of working in intercountry adoption, I have never known any adoptive parents with an approved home study who did not eventually get a child provided that they did not give up. Some had to change programs or countries when their first choice of source unexpectedly dosed, but all who trusted the adoption process and stayed with it eventually succeeded! So what is the worst thing that could happen? Unfortunately, a child chosen for you could possibly become very sick or even die; this is rare, in my experience. The child could become unavailable for some other reason, such as a birthmother's changing her mind before her parental rights were terminated in court. What would you do then? Naturally you would grieve for a time, but as soon as you felt ready to proceed, the placement agency would ordinarily give you preference for the next suitable child. Years ago my husband and I lost the first baby assigned to us, but the wonderful little boy who came to us later is so much a part of our family that we can't imagine any other child in his place. Other parents in our situation tell us the same thing. So don't give up: be patient and persistent. Tell your- self that when you do finally get your child when, not if all that you have gone through to become parents will seem well worth the struggle!

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