From Foster Home to Forever Home: What to Know Before You Adopt

Sandra Bullock’s announcement in 2015 of adopting a second child, this time from foster care, has sparked a much-needed discussion about the need for adoptive parents and the overall process. There are nearly 102,000 children and young adults currently in foster care nationwide searching for permanent families. Becoming a parent is a huge undertaking, and adopting a child comes with its own unique set of challenges, particularly when adopting from the foster care system.

The New York Foundling is a longstanding institution caring for vulnerable children and families. The organization conducted its first adoption in 1873 and quickly established itself as one of the country’s earliest advocates for abandoned children. We spoke with parents who adopted through The Foundling to share some of their tips and information on what they wish someone had told them before they adopted:

- **Understand the costs involved.**
  Raising a child is expensive. When adopting, you will likely face more costs upfront, such as lawyer fees to steer the adoption process. In addition to everyday needs and activities, you will need to consider the possible added expenses if you have a child with special needs, medical issues, etc.

  This is particularly true for adoptive mother Tanya Goode, who adopted four siblings through The Foundling. “There are small, practical things to consider, like ‘is your home big enough for when the children are older and need their own space?’ Or, ‘is your car adequate for your growing family?’ And even the grocery bills—you’d be surprised how much you’ll end up spending on food when you have extra mouths to feed!” says Goode.

- **Do you want an open or closed adoption?**
  Does the growing family you are envisioning include another parent, possibly a third? Open adoptions allow for the biological parent’s continued involvement in the child’s life, typically for special occasions and celebrations like birthdays, holidays, and graduations. The parent recognizes that he or she cannot live with the child and is in agreement with the adoption but still wants to maintain a relationship. In this situation, biological and adoptive parents must find a way to get along and work together. In a closed adoption, you and your new son or daughter have no contact with the biological parent(s) at all. Take time to consider the role, or lack thereof that you may want the biological parent to play moving forward in your child’s life.

  Toniann Gelardo, who was featured in a Today Show segment in 2015 with her daughter Shay, mentioned that understanding the justice system and their stance on working to keep the biological family involved is incredibly important to the decision. “Parents should be aware of the time and effort you need to provide in supporting the child in getting freed from their biological parents through the court system, as well as the stress and anxiety levels it puts on the child and yourself during the process,” said Gelardo. “I feel as if the system leaves you and the child at the mercy of their laws, and their laws seem to protect the parents more than the
children. Knowledge is power, and if I had a better understanding of the system and its laws my daughter and I would have went through less of a battle to be a family.”

- **You’re ready, but is the rest of the family?**
  If you have other children living at home, have an open and honest conversation with them to hear their feelings about the adoption. Even if you have been a foster parent previously and your children have been supportive, a permanent adoption is very different, so you want to make sure that they are comfortable with having a new, permanent sibling. And remember to be sensitive to their needs after the adoption, as they may struggle with the transition.

- **How old is the child you would like to adopt?**
  Consider the age of the child you want to adopt and how that affects your family. Teenagers who are adopted often have brothers or sisters that they want to stay connected to. If this is the case, be realistic of what his or her needs will be moving forward. Are you comfortable with the child you adopt visiting other siblings who may be living in a foster home, or hours away? When you adopt a younger child, he or she will learn your parenting style and implementation of discipline early on. Yet when they get older, they might lash out and behave in ways you didn’t expect.

  “When considering adopting from foster care, it is so important to find out a child’s complete medical history, so that you are not surprised by any potential health issues later,” said Goode. “And this includes history of abuse and trauma, which can manifest itself in many ways as a child matures.”

  Keep in mind that adoption agencies will provide as much information as possible, but may not have all the answers.

- **And finally, be ready to handle the potential emotional and physical baggage.**
  Take your time and remember to breathe. An emotional connection won’t happen overnight. Kids don’t adjust as fast as you might think they should, and sometimes you just need to comfortably reassure a child that he or she is safe and loved.

Adopting a child from foster care can be uniquely rewarding, as you are able to provide that child with a level of love and stability that they may not have ever experienced before. The process can sometimes be long and challenging, so you should be prepared and speak to others who have been through it before if possible. Ultimately, if you decide to embark on the journey, the reward is unparalleled.

  “It’s important for the foster family to really be involved, but to also be fostering with the intent of adopting for all of the RIGHT reasons,” said Gelardo. “I believe that any foster family will become unconditionally involved in this process if they are truly fostering for the love of that child. I myself knew immediately that I wanted my daughter Shay to be part of my life forever, and I worked at every cost to ensure that would happen.”

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