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The adoption option

Families open hearts, homes to children here and abroad

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People consider adoption for many reasons, and whether they choose domestic, international or foster-care adoption can vary. But one thing is the same: All hope to make life better for a child who doesn't have a family or a place to call home.

Tony and Nancy Rivera of Wilmington originally decided to adopt to find a companion for their child. "When our son Tony was 8, we went through the state foster-adopt program to find a playmate for him," says Nancy, then a New Jersey resident. "We told them we wanted a child near our son's age, but when they contacted us, it was for a 2-month-old boy named Alex."

At first the Riveras declined the agency's request, but when subsequent phone calls came in, Tony and Nancy re-evaluated their decision. "The third time they called us we said yes," Nancy recalls. "We figured if they contacted us that many times, maybe this was the child we were supposed to get."

But the Riveras got more than they planned for. "Two months later, the agency called again. This time they said Alex had a 2-year-old brother named Alfonzo who was in foster care and asked if we wanted to adopt him. So we did," Nancy says. "Then a year later, we found out the boys had two sisters -- Candice, who was 6, and Anastasia, who was 8 -- so we decided to adopt them to keep the family together."

John and Jo-El Azato of Wilmington took a different adoption route and went through a private agency to find an international child. "We had seen an ad in the newspaper about a seminar on domestic and international adoptions, so we went," recalls Jo-El. "We knew we wanted an international child who was about 1 or 2 years old. And after doing research, we decided to go with a child from China."

During the 14 months the Azatos waited for their daughter, Nina, they busied themselves with preparations. "We had a baby shower and got her room ready," Jo-El says. "We also read a lot about parenting and asked friends who had kids lots of questions."

Waiting, experts say, can be the hardest part of the adoption process, whether it's waiting for the paperwork to go through, or waiting to receive the referral, or waiting to welcome the child home. But while families are on hold, there are things they can do.

"When I talk with couples, I tell them to use the time productively," says Sam Wojnilower, a social worker with Adoptions from the Heart in Wynnewood, Pa. "Read about adopting and raising children, attend workshops, find a pediatrician, that kind of thing, so they're already being active parents."

Although the Riveras didn't need a primer on child rearing, they did have to learn how to help their adopted children adjust to a new environment. "I think it was harder on Candice and Anastasia because they were older than the boys," Nancy says. "I had to tell the girls they weren't going to see their biological parents anymore. I'm not sure Candice totally understood, but Anastasia took it very hard. She was a little weepy and apprehensive, maybe even confused. I spent a lot of time with her letting her know she could come and talk with me. I told her it was OK to talk about her mom and dad and I would listen. I tried very hard to build a relationship and establish her trust."

That's what Mary Lou Edgar, a consultant for Upper Bay Adoption and Counseling in Newark, advises. "One of the

best ways to help newly adopted children adjust in their environment is to close in and establish those family relationships," she says. "There's a natural inclination to want to celebrate with family and friends, but that can come later."

Social worker Wojnilower agrees. "Children need time to adjust to their new family. They also need to establish a consistent routine as soon as possible. This is even truer with international adoption, where things like food and times zones are different."

Although Nina was only 10 months old when the Azatos adopted her, she, too, had an adjustment to make. "I think the hardest part of the adoption process was that we didn't bond right away," recalls Jo-El. "When we first got Nina, she was well aware we weren't her regular caretaker and the hotel we were staying in was not the orphanage. She wouldn't eat and covered her face with her hands. She also cried a lot."

But three days into the adoption, things changed. "We were still at the hotel and Nina had fallen asleep on the bed. When she woke up, she rolled over and I caught her before she fell off the side. She laughed; she thought it was a game. From that point on it was completely different. I knew we had bonded."

One day soon, Nina may be making yet another adjustment. "We are just now starting the adoption process to get a boy from Vietnam," Jo-El says. "We want to get another Asian child so there is a similarity between them, particularly in this big Italian family."

ADOPTION RESOURCES

Adoption is a broad topic covering everything from domestic infant to international to children from foster care. Add to that transracial, transcultural or older children, as well as those with physical, mental or emotional challenges, and the subject can be overwhelming. Families interested in pursuing adoption should start by asking what type of adoption they want. From there, they can begin their search for a private or government-sponsored agency.

When choosing an agency, it is important that families feel comfortable with the organization and know they're being heard. Following is a list of questions to ask when seeking an adoption agency:

- Is this a licensed adoption agency?
- What types of adoption are available at this agency?
- What are this agency's requirements to adopt (age, religion, income, marital status, other children)?
- What does a home study with this agency entail?
- How does the agency train prospective families, individually or in groups?
- Does the agency provide support for the adopting family after a child has been placed in the home?
- Can the agency provide referrals of other families who have worked with the agency so you can speak with them about their adoption experience?

Following is a list of resources for families who are considering adoption:

Books

"Adopting on Your Own: The Complete Guide to Adopting as a Single Parent" by Lee Varon

"How to Adopt Internationally" by Jean Nelson-Erichson and Heino R. Erichson

"Raising Adopted Children" by Lois Ruskai Melina

"There Are Babies to Adopt: A Resource Guide for Prospective Parents" by Christine A. Adamec

"Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew" by Sherrie Eldridge

Web sites

- www.adoption.com -- Provides information on private domestic, foster care and international adoption.
- www.adoptivefamiliesmagazine.com -- The nation's leading adoption magazine provides independent, practical information on adopting and raising healthy, happy children.
- www.adoptuskids.org -- The only federally funded photo listing service for children in foster care waiting for permanent families.
- www.childwelfare.gov -- Offers resources on all aspects of domestic and international adoption, including adoption from foster care.
- www.rainbowkids.com -- One of the top sites for international adoption information, featuring photo listings of waiting children, listings of agencies and articles on adoption.

Support groups

- Adoptive Families with Information and Support (AFIS) offers support to all types of families, as well as social and educational events. For more information, call Mary Jo Wolfe at 571-8784.
- Adoptive Families of Color with Information and Support (AFOCIS) is a sub-group of AFIS that offers social and educational events for families of color. For more information, call Tanya Woodland at 368-8417.
- Transracial/Transcultural Adoptive Parent Training Group offers one-day training sponsored by AFIS to assist adoptive families in understanding the importance of race, culture and ethnicity in the life of a child. For more information, call Mary Jo Wolfe at 571-8784.

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