



Creating a
Lifebook



Adoption
Connection
Workshops



2005
Statistics



Recent
Arrivals



Connections



YOU HAVE DECIDED TO ADOPT ... NOW WHAT?

International Versus Domestic



Although the domestic process disheartened Beth initially, she succeeded in adopting her daughter with the help of a birthmother in California.



efore a family decides on what type of adoption journey to embark on they will ask themselves many questions: Do we adopt an infant domestically in an open adoption? Would we rather adopt an infant, toddler or older child through the foster/adoption public system, or from another country? By researching the different options many families sort out what will be most important for them in their adoption process, and how these decisions will affect their extended

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Adoption Connection is a full-service, licensed adoption agency and non-sectarian program affiliated with Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.

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Creating a Lifebook for Your Child

What is a Lifebook?

A Lifebook, or adoption storybook, is a handmade scrapbook and keepsake that chronicles and illustrates a child's journey to his or her adoptive home. It is used as a source of information as well as a way to open up the discussion of adoption with a child.

Why is it beneficial to create a Lifebook for my child?

Looking at a Lifebook can help adopted children learn about their history. Having a book to look at, read, and enjoy together can also be a catalyst for discussion between parent and child. Children can ask questions that are important to them and parents can address them with age-appropriate answers. Some parents find that their child will want to read and look at their Lifebook every night before they go to sleep for six months and then suddenly decide to leave it on the bookshelf for a while before taking it down again for new discussion and insight. The Lifebook can be kept in the child's room to be looked at alone if he or she wishes.

What should I include?

Every Lifebook will be different and may include individual keepsakes and photographs from the child's birth and/or early history. They can be typed or handwritten. Some families will buy a photograph album while others may use a three-ring binder so that pages can be updated or added.

Many families provide answers to questions that their young child may have when looking at the book together, such as: Where am I from? Why was I adopted?

Some families create a personal name for their child's book like "Leon's First Year" or "The Day Abigail Was Born." Families adopting internationally may include early pictures of their children with their foster families or caregivers. Maps, visas or postcards can be included to show the parents' trip to the foreign country. In a domestic adoption the book may start with a picture of the child's birthmother before she gives birth. Keepsakes, like the child's hospital wristband, can be included or a special note or object from the birth family. Remember, the Lifebook is for the child. The focus should be how the *child* came to your family, not the adoptive family's journey to parenting.

Why does getting started feel so hard?

For many families who have experienced infertility and then the emotional roller coaster of adoption, looking back to the child's adoption



■ **Jaxson Charles Lee.** Born 12/28/05.

Workshops

You do not have to be a client of Adoption Connection to take advantage of our great workshops! Here are a few:

will bring up feelings of excitement and joy, but may also elicit feelings of disappointment or sadness related to their inability to conceive a biological child. Feeling ready to begin the book will be different for each family.

Also, adoptive parents who may have gathered images, mementos and design ideas may still struggle with the actual writing. It can take time and contemplation to find the right words to address difficult questions in a child's history.

Where can I find ideas, information and support?

Because the process of putting together a Lifebook can bring up difficult emotions for adoptive parents, many families benefit from one-time or ongoing Lifebook workshops to gain support, ask questions and brainstorm ideas with adoption professionals and other parents. Adoption Connection schedules "Creating a Lifebook" workshops, as well as Parents Place of JFCS in Sonoma. Working through some of these feelings will help parents feel more comfortable when they share the book with their child. They can practice answering difficult questions with other adoptive parents and gain support normalizing the emotional issues they face.

A few websites to help you get started are:

www.adoptionlearningpartners.org,
www.lifebooksource.com,
www.adoptionlifebooks.com,
www.scrapandtell.com.

Get started and good luck!

Adoption Connection Domestic Orientation Introduces prospective adoptive parents to the domestic, infant adoption process and our services. Free of charge. Held in San Francisco, Sacramento, Palo Alto, and Los Gatos.

Adoption Connection International Orientation Introduces prospective adoptive parents to the international adoption process and our services. Free of charge. Held in San Francisco.

Preparing for Domestic Adoption A 5 session series for adoptive parent(s) adopting domestically through open, infant adoption. Topics include: understanding open adoption, birthmother relationships and raising an adopted child. Guest speakers include adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents.

Preparing for International Adoption A 3 session series for adoptive parent(s) adopting a child internationally. Topics include overseas travel, attachment, choosing a country, and raising an adopted child. Guest speakers include adult adoptees, adoptive parents, international agencies and facilitators.

Creating a Lifebook Whether you brought your child home from another country or straight from the hospital at birth learn how to create a special book that illustrates and celebrates how she/he came into your family.

Finding the Words Held in hospitals, clinics and social service centers, an in-service for professionals whose clients are facing unplanned pregnancies. Topics include a discussion on open adoption and how to approach clients about the adoption option, and an overview of current adoption policy.

Talking to Your Child About Adoption Learn how to talk to your child in an age-appropriate way. Learn appropriate language to feel comfortable and confident answering your child's questions.

Transracial Adoptive Parenting Workshop A 2 session series for families considering adopting a child of a different ethnicity than themselves or their partner. Discussion will include understanding racial and cultural identity.

LGBT Adoptive Parenting Issues For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender couples or individuals who are in the process of adopting, or considering adoption. Explore special issues involving adopting and parenting in a gay or lesbian family.

Newborn Care for Adoptive Parents An infant class just for prospective adoptive parents! Gain hands-on practice swaddling, bathing, and taking a temperature. Learn about hunger cues, colicky babies, selecting a daycare and baby products.

Call us for dates, times and fees. Our calendar can be found at: www.adoptionconnection.org/workshops.asp



Recent Arrival



■ Nina & Mateo Armando Litras.

Arrived from
Guatemala on 6/3/05
and 5/9/04.

families and their children as they grow into healthy adults.

No one adoption process is right for everyone and Lynne Fingerman, co-director of Adoption Connection, says, “Many families ask us for advice on what is the ‘easiest’ or ‘best’ way to adopt... I have to tell them there is no best way! What every family must decide is what is best for *their* individual family.” Each adoption process will fit the adopting families’ individual strengths and personalities depending on what is most important to them.

For some families how a child comes to be adoptable plays a vital role in their choice of adoption journey. In the domestic process birth families voluntarily relinquish their role as parent and a

healthy infant in the United States usually has little problem finding a loving home. The families who adopt these children almost always know the circumstances that lead the birthmother to make such a decision and can tell their child that story.

In contrast, children outside the United States, in developing countries, may have few resources or little hope of long-term care. Mary Ann Shui and her husband Phillip successfully adopted one of their daughters from China. The deciding factor for their decision, Mary Ann says, came down to “basic needs... here we have welfare, public funding and charity. In places like China, the government relies on families to help their own. Chinese give quite extensively within their family



The Shui family was completed through an international adoption from China.

network, but charity to strangers is a very foreign concept.” Debbie Parelskin, Adoption Connection’s International Program Coordinator, agrees. “A large part of the international fee goes to care of the children in the orphanage and also provides opportunities for those children who, unfortunately, are never adopted.”

Another important deciding factor for families is how much biological information is available to them at the time of the adoption placement. In a domestic adoption adoptive families will receive medical, biological and social history of the birth family along with prenatal records. (How much will differ from adoption to adoption.) Since the adoptive family is often participating in an open adoption they can also ask the birth parents specific questions and gain knowledge through the time they spend together before and after the adoption takes place.

When Miguel Rosales and Allison Hyde began looking into adoption they were drawn to open adoption because they liked the idea of having as much biological information about the birth family as possible, and the opportunity to remain in contact with the birth family: an *open* adoption. Regarding their son’s adoption Allison says, “We have been able to establish a wonderful relationship with our birthmother, being present at the birth, and knowing that Emiliano will be able to know his biological roots.”

In international adoptions, children have lost ties to their biological parents, usually having been orphaned or abandoned. Although international adoption

allows families to decide on a specific age range, ethnicity and gender of their child they will not be able to maintain any relationship with the birth family after the child is home in the United States.

Adoptive parents may be aware of the region their children were originally from while others remain in contact with the foster family or orphanage caregivers. When a family receives a referral for a child they will usually get a copy of a current medical report from their foreign adoption agency or facilitator, but it is often incomplete or inaccurate. Families should be aware that children adopted overseas will have limited or unknown biological, medical and social histories – except for very rare cases. Families adopting internationally also need to be prepared for certain medical conditions, delays in motor or speech development, and attachment issues that could arise with children who had previously been institutionalized. It is recommended that families have the child’s medical report reviewed by medical professionals who specialize in foreign pediatric records of adoptable children.

There are unknowns in a domestic adoption as well, including the sex of the baby and the infant’s health at birth. The most frightening unknown is whether the birthmother will go forward with the adoption after the birth of the baby. The fear of the birth mother changing her mind before the adoption is complete may be too high an emotional risk for some families. This can be especially

Continued next page

2005 Statistics

Last year Adoption Connection completed **225 international and domestic homestudies.**

Last year Adoption Connection welcomed home **15 children through international adoption** (countries include, but not limited to, Russia, China and Guatemala) and **completed 128 domestic infant adoptions.**

Recent Arrival



■ **Rose Mackenzie Aaland.** Born 9/30/05

difficult when a relationship has already been established. This happened to adoptive mother Beth Van Story who matched with a birthmother who changed her mind about an adoption plan for her unborn baby. Beth says, “In domestic adoption the lack of control, and having situations fall through, was more than frustrating. It was disheartening and emotionally very difficult.”

Although her first failed adoption rekindled her interest in the international process, she did eventually meet the right birthmother and adopted her daughter domestically in California.

Uncertainties are also present in international adoption where the two governments play a large role in how smoothly the process moves. Sometimes due to political events or changes in regulations the foreign country may close their adoption program without warning. This may cause families to switch countries, or wait until the country opens its borders again to foreign families. In 2004, the Chinese government put a hold on all adoptions when they diagnosed the SARS virus in several Chinese cities. Until the government felt the virus was under control they stopped foreign families from getting approval to travel. This unexpectedly slowed down the adoption process in China for several months.

Desie Mehrabian and her husband Mark adopted their son from Russia in 2002. Currently in the process of adopting their second child, they are having difficulties with delays in Russia the second time around. Desie says, “Dealing with the two governments (the U.S.

and Russia’s) is frustrating. In Russia, you do what they tell you [update forms, notarize documents, etc.], but many times there is no answer to why we’re doing it.”

Time and money also play a role in how adoptive families grow their family. Although both processes can range widely in cost – from \$15,000 to \$35,000 – domestic adoption tends to be less expensive on average because there are usually less administrative and travel costs. Both domestic and international adoptions can take anywhere from six to twenty-four months before a family brings their child home. In international adoption it will depend on the country from which the family is adopting and their laws and requirements. In domestic adoption the wait time to take home a baby will be less defined. A family will adopt a baby when they have connected with a birth family that has voluntarily placed with them. Families should consider how much uncertainty they can live with in their adoption process. Although international adoptions may be more expensive the family will probably have more of a structured timeline for placement. In the domestic process families may not know exactly what the total cost will be until they find the right birth family, but it may be much cheaper and a shorter timeline in the long run.

Lesbian and gay families have additional factors to consider when weighing their options. Most foreign countries have specific guidelines and policies to inhibit same-sex families from adopting. Nevertheless, some families do overcome these challenges and complete their adoptions

internationally. Because of these stringent regulations, more and more same-sex families are pursuing, and successfully completing, domestic adoptions with birth families who are open and excited to place their child with them. Approximately 15% of Adoption Connection's domestic families consider themselves gay or lesbian.

Making a Choice

So how do families decide? Every individual family will make a personal decision. Desie Mehrabian says that in both types of adoption there will be pros and cons. She tells families to "think about which compromises you can live with. Definitely talk to as many people as you can, go to information sessions and conferences, talk to friends, co-workers and neighbors who you know have adopted already. Check out parent groups, websites, agencies for adoptive families, and magazines focused on adoption." Your personality could also play a role in the type of process selected. Lynne Fingerman mentions, "Do you work better with a more detailed timeline, or is your personality a little more 'go with the flow'? It could affect which process suits you better."

Adoptive families should reach out for the support they need. To cope with the uncertainty and stress of her family's adoption Mary Ann Shui would "write down a note to myself regarding our reason for choosing to adopt so I would not lose sight of the big picture in the midst of the overwhelming logistics." Adoption Connection also recommends that families attend orientations and workshops so that



they can gain adoption knowledge, talk about their feelings, and meet others who are going through the same process. Randie Bencanann, Adoption Connection's co-director, says, "Some families may feel like they are all alone and their feelings of worry are not being experienced by other people navigating the adoption process. Speaking with an adoption professional, or another family who is struggling with the process, can be reassuring and relieve stress." We are also available to meet with prospective adoptive parents struggling to make decisions about what kind of adoption is right for them.

Families should keep in the back of their minds that, no matter which adoption process they choose, if they stay positive and persevere, they will be successful at completing their family through adoption.

Miguel and Allison adopted their son, Emiliano, in an open adoption with birth mother, Priscilla.

Recent Arrival



■ **Violet Isabelle Fratus.** Born 8/25/05

What's New? Adoption Connection is currently **working on an exciting new project:** a video that illustrates and explores the complex emotional choice adoption can be for birth families. The final product will be an educational documentary to be used in clinics, social service agencies and hospitals. We thank the Levine-Lent Foundation for supporting us in such a worthwhile endeavor.

Save the Date This years **Adoption Connection Annual Family Picnic** will be held on October 7th, 2006 from 12 noon to 3:00 pm at Julius Kahn Park in the beautiful San Francisco Presidio. We hope to see you and your loved ones there for all the fun.

Teen Connections Recently, Adoption Connection sent out **surveys to families parenting adopted children over the age of 12.** We need your help! If you received these surveys (for both teens and parents) please send them in so that we may use them to help create web content that will address you and your teen's questions and concerns. Look for updates on our website in the coming months. Questions? Contact Dana at Adoption Connection (415) 359-2478 or e-mail danaw@jfps.org

We believe that in an adoption, **everyone gains** when given a chance to learn about one another. **Committed to education, counseling and support,** our goal is to empower both birth and adoptive parents before and after the birth to create the adoption that works best for everyone involved. **Adoption Connection** welcomes couples and individuals of all ages, religions, and ethnic background or sexual orientation.

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