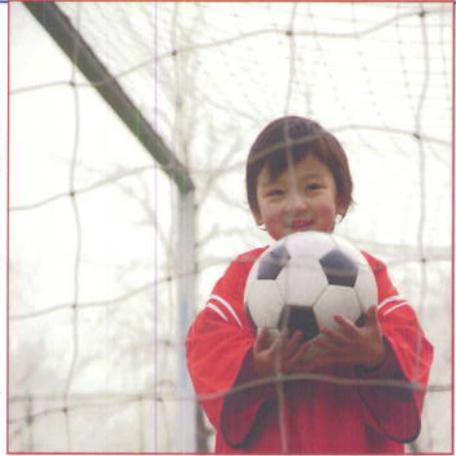


"Semper Gumby" — Lessons Learned While Navigating the International Adoption Process

by MAJ Brian Owens

Adopting a child is a wonderful thing. By contrast, the steps you must take to accomplish an adoption can be very challenging and stressful. This is to be expected, since you are adding a child to your family, completing paperwork, monitoring your budget, waiting for bad news, and unsure about almost every step. The adoption process can take several months to several years, depending on the country of adoption, the gender of the child, and whether you are willing to adopt a healthy or special needs child.

People ask how much it costs. The easy answer is, cost doesn't matter. The child is what matters. So from the outset, if money is the focal point, international adoption is probably not a wise decision. This doesn't mean you can't be frugal and spend within your means, but if you are worried about the costs and expenses you might want to consider the domestic adoption alternative discussed below. Some things you may want to consider are: do you want a boy or a girl, how long are you willing to wait in order to complete an adoption, and do you want a child who has special needs?



It is possible to determine, with some certainty, the total cost of an international adoption. The following are some thoughts to keep in mind when budgeting for an adoption. To assist you in the adoption you should use an adoption agency; for certain countries it is required. Agency fees are fixed and vary according to the agency you choose. You should research potential agencies to ensure they are reputable and have a proven track record. Additionally, adoption expenses can vary significantly by country. Major expenses include: fees imposed by the country to complete the adoption, travel, lodging and meals for the duration of your stay in the country, and immigration application costs. Most adoption fees are relatively straightforward; my wife and I were able to get a good idea of what an adoption would cost in each country we were considering. There are also numerous organizations and foundations that provide money for families to complete an adoption. The money provided by these agencies is similar to a grant or scholarship for college. Applying for a grant or scholarship will require more paperwork, but the information you provide will be similar to what is required to complete the adoption. Additionally, DoD provides a \$2,000 reimbursement and up to 21 days uncharged leave to service members who adopt, and the IRS offers an adoption tax credit worth up to \$13,170 (for more information on the tax credit, see page 2). Lastly, you will almost certainly face some unanticipated expenses, so be prepared and have a cushion. Adoption may cost but there are ways to accomplish an adoption that can minimize out-of-pocket expenses. Creating your budget and expense plan will seem easy once you enter the next phase of paperwork, paperwork, and more paperwork.

Once the paperwork begins, expect it to last for at least one year after the adoption is complete. It has been over two years since we picked up our adopted daughter in China and we still have pending paperwork. To complete an adoption you must be very organized and have a good system in place. This becomes particularly important if you PCS every few years. The paperwork should be viewed and treated like any other important documents (e.g., birth certificates, marriage licenses, etc.). These are the documents that are used to legally establish the relationship between you and your child. We had three adoption home studies over a four-year period and each home study built on the previous one. If one home study were lost it could mean paying additional expenses to fill in the gaps, or starting over. Additionally, there are numerous documents that must be mailed and delivered between U.S. and foreign consulates, and other state and federal offices. Once your paperwork for adoption is approved, you get to travel to exotic locations to complete even more paperwork to finalize the adoption.

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The International Adoption Process (continued)

Another important factor to consider is where you will be living when you finalize the adoption. When you are booking your airline tickets, I strongly recommend buying refundable/changeable tickets. This may seem expensive, and it will definitely be tempting to buy less expensive tickets from a discount ticket agency. However, I learned the hard way (at the cost of a few thousand dollars) that you should buy refundable tickets so when something comes up, you can change them. If you are living in the U.S. and returning directly to the U.S., your child may acquire citizenship automatically. You may only need to complete one more packet to receive your child's naturalization certificate. If you are living outside the U.S. you will need to decide whether to first fly to the U.S. to acquire citizenship and obtain a U.S. passport for the child, or fly directly to your home outside the U.S. If you return from the adoption directly to your home outside the U.S., without acquiring U.S. citizenship and a U.S. passport, your child may need a visa from the country you are living in. This will require additional paperwork and a visit to the consulate of the country you are living in, while you are in the country of adoption. In other words, if I lived in Germany and planned on returning directly to Germany after completing an adoption in China, I would need to go to the German Consulate in China to obtain a German visa for our daughter. Also, if you are flying through a third country on your return to the U.S. you may need a visa for your child. For example, my daughter would need a Canadian visa if our return flight from China had included a layover in Vancouver, Canada, and our final destination was the U.S.

Finally, just when you think all of the paperwork is complete, I recommend re-adopting your child in a U.S. state. My daughter's adoption was finalized in China, so all of our original adoption records are located at the China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA). My wife and I re-adopted our daughter in the Commonwealth of Virginia, two years after the Chinese adoption was finalized. This entails additional expense, but you can complete it at your leisure as your budget allows. This will benefit you when your child needs a U.S. birth certificate (*e.g.*, when applying for schools, college, grants, scholarships, etc.). Instead of submitting Chinese documents to a U.S. or state agency, we can submit a document issued by the Commonwealth of Virginia. It is also much easier to write the Virginia Department of Vital Statistics than it is to contact the CCAA.

Eventually, there will be no more adoption paperwork to deal with, and you will only have to worry about spilled juice on the couch, broken bones, and the not-too-distant threat of boys calling your daughter!



The Domestic Adoption Alternative

by Teresa Robison

Couples who want to adopt a child should not overlook the domestic alternative. There are large numbers of children in the United States living in foster homes who long for the security that comes with being adopted. Many come from very difficult, often dire, circumstances. Domestic adoptions can usually be accomplished at a fraction of the cost of an international adoption (typically, only court costs), and without all the immigration issues and consular paperwork discussed above. Procedures vary from state to state, but generally involve social services investigations to ensure safe adoption for the child, and often include training in the issues surrounding adoption.

From a personal perspective, my husband and I adopted two siblings in California, ages one and two. The training we received was very helpful, we paid no costs at all, and our children are amazing. Adoption from foster care is not for the faint of heart; some of these children have faced horrific circumstances and will need great patience and care to overcome the trauma they experienced in their short lives. However, success in turning their lives around is surely one of the most rewarding things you can do with your own life. The love the children provide in return makes it all worthwhile.