

HOW TO ADOPT:

A Beginner's
Guide to
Getting
Started



CONTENTS

Introduction

Step 1: Domestic, International, or Foster Care

Step 2: Choose a Country to Adopt From

Step 3: Choose and Adoption Agency

Step 4: Adoption Fundraising Tips

Step 5: Adoption Grants Tips

INTRO

When we decided we were ready to look into adoption, we had no idea where to begin.

If you don't know anyone who has adopted, you probably haven't had much exposure to the world of adoption, and jumping in feels a lot like jumping into a deep, dark hole.

On the other side of the story, a lot of the people who can help, don't know how much the rest of the world doesn't know about adoption. (It took me a couple conversations with representatives and grant fund members, etc. before I realized this.) They're working very hard to advocate for adoption, and they're doing wonderful jobs of it, but when you're involved in anything day after day, it's natural to lose sight of the starting line.

There's a gap.

I am by no means an expert in adoption. As I write this, I haven't even finished my first one.

But I am an expert at navigating the gap. And that's what this is about.

HOW TO ADOPT A CHILD: AN INTRODUCTION

Because when we started, we paid a very large sum of money to an adoption consultant, and later regretted it. They were very helpful in getting us started, but once we signed up with an agency, our family coordinator took over and we've hardly spoken to the consultant since.

I really just needed some help getting started, and I suspect other people might too, so that's what we're going to do here.

If you're interested in learning more about adoption, or you're thinking about jumping in, **you really just need a basic framework for how it goes, the right set of questions to get you started in the right direction, and a list of resources you can turn to.**

We'll touch on domestic adoption a very little bit as part of Step 1, but as our family didn't go down those roads, I can only point you in a good direction. **The rest will help you get started on an international adoption.**

We're not going to cover the entire process, because the point here is to bridge the initial gap. Your adoption agency will hold your hand through the details, and they'll do a much better job of it than I would. **What this ebook does cover is everything I wish I had known when I got started.**

So let's do this.

"I've often heard it said that adoption isn't for the faint of heart, but I wonder if it's more appropriate to say that adoption is all about the faint of heart. It's not easy. None of it. But rarely do we get to what is worthy via *easy*."



Kelly Raudenbush
Co-Founder
The Sparrow Fund
📷 kellytheoverthinker



Step 1:

DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL, OR FOSTER CARE



STEP 1: DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL, OR FOSTER CARE

Different families enter the adoption process at different places. There is no universal starting line.

Some enter at, “We want to be a multiethnic family,” or, “We know a young woman that we want to partner with.” And that’s great.

Some enter, like ours did, at, “We want a child,” and for those families the gap to getting started on the adoption journey is biggest. **Because those families are still trying to find a starting line.**

If that’s you, your starting line is here: domestic or international adoption? That’s your first decision.

THE ADOPTION JOURNEY STARTING LINE

I realize now that this seems odd to people familiar with the world of adoption, but we didn’t even know that this was the first decision we had to make. **We just wanted a toddler, and we didn’t really care if he came from Nevada or China.** I guess I thought I could sign up with an adoption agency and they would just find one for me—from wherever—but it doesn’t work like that.

The first fork in the road is deciding which race you’re even going to run.

OPTION A: DOMESTIC ADOPTION

I can’t tell you a whole lot about this option, but there are lots of people who can and they’re only a Google away. I can tell you this:



Domestic adoption is **much more affordable** than international adoption. There will be lawyer fees or agency fees, and probably other fees that I’m not aware of, but the total is much smaller overall.



Domestic adoption is really **the only way to adopt an infant**. The domestic adoption process matches adoptive families with pregnant birth mothers (and it’s ultimately up to the birth mother to choose the adopting couple or family).



Domestic adoption is **generally faster** than international adoption. Once a family is matched with a birth mother there is, obviously, a very limited wait time. Except in circumstances where birth mothers change their minds about giving up a baby, a domestic adoption is generally completed within a year.

STEP 1: DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL, OR FOSTER CARE



Domestic adoption is **open or semi-open** these days, which means the child's birth/first mother and/or family will always be a part of your lives. Closed domestic adoptions—where the birth family has no contact or information about the child—are very rare, and generally discouraged by the adoption community on the basis of what's best for the child.



Adopting a child older than a newborn means **adopting out of the foster care system**. Foster care is state-run, so that process will be different everywhere, but as the general goal of foster care is to eventually reunite families, younger children tend not to be free for permanent adoption. Older children can be adopted more easily. Adopting a toddler from foster care generally means starting your relationship as a foster family with an uncertain future.

OPTION B: INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

International adoption journeys vary *dramatically* depending on which country you adopt from (yes, that's your next decision), but in general:



International adoption is **expensive**. There's really no way around it. Even the estimated price tag will vary depending on the country from which you adopt, but plan on tens of thousands of dollars.



International adoption **takes time**. Again, this varies dramatically depending on the country program you choose, but the fastest international adoption processes start at 12 to 18 months. Others take years.



International adoption is **closed**. Most children in international orphanages were anonymously given up, so there is no way to know about their family history. That has emotional implications for the child as he/she grows. It also brings with it immediate and long-term implications related to the lack of information about pregnancy, labor, and delivery, as well as family medical history.



International adoption is especially **uncertain**, as any number of international or domestic crises, natural disasters, policy changes, diplomatic failures, etc., could have unknown consequences for the adoption community.



International adoptees usually have at least a minor **medical need**. Again, this varies widely—some country programs consider things like low birth weight and eczema “special needs,”—but it is a consideration.

STEP 1: DOMESTIC, INTERNATIONAL, OR FOSTER CARE

DOMESTIC VS INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

It's a lot to think about.

There may be (hopefully) one condition or circumstance that makes the decision for you. For our family, it was the age factor. We wanted to adopt a toddler and our house was too small to license for foster care, so the only remaining option was international adoption. The reverse is true for other families: They really want a newborn, so domestic adoption is right for them. For others the issue of open vs closed, or the financial considerations, might be non-negotiable.

If none of that resonates, then **talk with your spouse about what you both want, and prioritize the list.** Maybe you'd prefer an international adoption, but the expense is more than you want to deal with. Maybe you'd prefer an infant, but just don't think you could handle an open-adoption situation.

Again, it's a lot to think about, but as you start to go through the options, you'll discover which route is right for your family.

If you decide that domestic adoption is the right path for your family, then I hug you and send you on your way. You'll need an attorney or an agency next, so ask your Facebook crew for recommendations or start Googling. You can also skip ahead to Step 3 and check out some of the agencies on our list. A lot of larger agencies do both international and domestic adoptions.

"Open vs closed adoption tends to be the most commonly unforeseen factor in deciding between domestic and international adoption. Many families may not realize that in most domestic adoptions today, you are not only adopting a newborn: you are also accepting the birth parent into your life – potentially a big part! It can be a beautiful thing but certainly has its challenges."



Madelyn Pierce
Intake and Adoptions Program Coordinator
America World Adoption
 [americaworldadoption](#)

Step 2:

CHOOSE A COUNTRY TO ADOPT FROM



STEP 2: CHOOSE A COUNTRY

Once you've decided on an international adoption, **you need to choose a country to adopt from.**

Again, some people come into this process with this decision already made. They know someone who adopted from China and their hearts were stirred, or they did a missions trip to India and fell in love. And that's awesome, because making these decisions from scratch kind of sucks.

This is another one of those things that seems like common knowledge if you're familiar with the world of international adoption, but totally blindsided me. I thought I could just say, "I'll take one," and then we'd find a child who fits our family.

I didn't care where the child came from.

But there is no singular international adoption process. Each country has systems in place to deal with their own orphans, and you have to work with those systems. Adopting from "anywhere" would really, logistically, look more like adopting from "everywhere," and it's just impossible to work in more than one system at a time.

So you need to choose which country you want to adopt from before you can even really start the process.

CHOOSING A COUNTRY VS. CHOOSING AN AGENCY

There is bound to be some overlap, because the best info you'll find on international adoption programs is going to be on agency websites. **You will be learning about the agencies as you learn about the country programs.**

But when you do officially apply to work with an adoption agency (more on that in Step 3), you need to apply for a specific country program with that agency.

That said, because of the inevitable overlap, **don't hesitate to reach out to agency representatives for help.** We talked to representatives from five agencies when we were starting our adoption, and everyone was very nice and very helpful. Yes, they are—in a way—sales people and they want you to choose their agency, but most of them just have huge hearts for adoption and are happy to get you connected to adopt a child no matter what.

STEP 2: CHOOSE A COUNTRY

And if, in the process, you really connect with a particular agency representative, or find that you really like one particular agency, then go with it. **It's okay to settle on an agency first**, and then let them help you choose one of their programs. Just be aware that each agency has a different list of countries they work in.

"We are advocates for adoption and want families to be successful, so if America World is not the right fit, that's alright. Of course, we are biased and will also advocate for why families should choose America World, but at the end of the day, we just hope fewer children are suffering and more families are blessed by the gift of adoption."

- Madelyn Pierce, AWAA



HOW TO CHOOSE A COUNTRY PROGRAM

I made a copy of my spreadsheet for you, and copied over a few rows of info. You can get it online at bit.ly/adoption-worksheet. (You'll need to copy/paste it into your own Google Sheet or download it as an Excel file so you can edit it.)

Each country's international adoption program is different. You won't know everything about any program before you jump in, but some disparities to ask and think about include:

What's the overall time frame? This might vary a little bit from one agency to the next, but they're all estimating anyway. No one is going to guarantee a time frame for completing an international adoption, but you can get a general idea.

STEP 2: CHOOSE A COUNTRY

How long do you have to be in-country? Each country has their own requirements for how many parents need to be in-country, how many times, for how long. China was the “easiest” we found—only one parent needs to go for one, two-week trip. Other countries require both parents, longer stays, and/or multiple trips. With two working parents and a kid at home already, this was a huge consideration for us.

What’s the estimated cost? This seemed more important when I started than it does now, but I left the column on the spreadsheet. It will vary by agency, some will be much higher but include travel expenses, and—again—these are estimates. International fees and policies change, airfare fluctuates, etc. Looking back, this column seems pretty meaningless, but it feels important at the beginning, so it’s there.

Is the country a Hague Convention partner? The Hague Convention is an international agreement that puts safeguards in place to protect children from human trafficking. It is not a requirement for adoption partnerships with the U.S., and it’s up to each country to agree and then comply. You can adopt children from countries that have or have not agreed to participate, but you will want to understand the convention guidelines and the implications for working with a country that does not comply.

(Note that your options for adoption grants will also be reduced if you adopt from a non-Hague country. Some grant organizations will not award funds to families adopting from non-Hague countries.)



"While some say The Hague Convention has made the inter-country adoption process more complicated, we need to remember that the intention is to protect vulnerable children from more hurt. The Hague Convention creates clear standards that unify diverse systems so that children can be treated with value and kept as safe as possible."

– Kelly Raudenbush, The Sparrow Fund

STEP 2: CHOOSE A COUNTRY

What do they require of you? In addition to having unique travel requirements, each country has different requirements regarding your age(s), the number of children already in your home, the age of the youngest child in your home, your average annual income, your net worth, etc. All of those details are available online or from the agency rep you're emailing. Additionally, most agencies have a pre-application form that will collect a lot of these details for you, so they can find the country program(s) that best fit your family's situation.

Add columns for whatever is important to you. Agency application fee, option to choose the child's gender (some countries don't let you choose), number of orphans in-country, etc.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION COUNTRY PROGRAM INFO

See the online version of this guide (bit.ly/adoption-beginners-guide) for links to a few specific country programs at various adoption agencies.

A NOTE ABOUT THE FEELS

I mentioned earlier that making this decision from scratch kind of sucks, and it does. This can be difficult, **so own how you're feeling** about the process and know that it's normal and it's okay.

You might suddenly be more exposed to human trafficking, or be forced to see it closer to home than you have in the past. As you consider the Hague guidelines and whether or not it's important to you to adopt from a Hague partner country, the issue of human trafficking will become a small part of your life for a moment, and that's difficult.

You might find yourself angry at the system. As you compare enormous price tags and program requirements, you may find yourself debating whether or not you want to participate in the system. I would only remind you that the child who is waiting for you is not to blame for the system and has already suffered enough because of it.

Is it broken? Maybe. Are there officials somewhere padding fees to line their own pockets? Could be. But none of it means that child on the other end is less deserving of a family. Dedicate yourself to reform if you find your heart breaking over all of it, **but don't leave an orphan behind because of it.**

You might feel paralyzed at the choice before you. We joke about the paradox of choice when we stand motionless in front of a wall of toothpaste options; I guarantee it's worse when you're looking at thousands of children. And if you're a person of faith, or fate, and you believe there is one particular child out there for you, the pressure to make the right choice feels real. It's okay.

STEP 2: CHOOSE A COUNTRY

This is where the spreadsheet, or however you're keeping notes from your research, comes in handy. **Take it one decision at a time.** If you have two working parents in your family, you probably need a country program with minimum in-country requirements, so cross out those that require long or multiple trips—or anything that your family just cannot accommodate. If you're in a rush, highlight the programs with shorter overall timeline estimates; if you have time and need to do some fundraising, highlight the programs that take longer.

And if you are a person of faith, pray, and **pray in the knowledge that his sheep hear his voice** – even when he's not shouting. He will lead you. It can feel like you're crossing off children, but you're not. You're not "choosing" one, you're finding *the* one.

It is an emotional process from the very beginning, and in ways that we were not necessarily prepared for. I was prepared to feel overwhelmed and anxious and in love. **I was not, necessarily, prepared to feel angry or guilty.**

Be open with your spouse about it, even if it seems silly. Express your frustrations and confusion to the agency representative(s) you're working with; I guarantee they've heard and felt it all before.



"A lot of the expense and lengthy process is for good reason – for the protection of the children and to prevent children being placed in unsafe homes or from being trafficked. However, we empathize with the frustration of many adoptive parents, because while all the paperwork and details are being handled, children are not getting the proper care and attention that they need to flourish.

"Thankfully we believe in a God that heals and redeems, and we believe in fighting for more efficient and quick processes so that children can be with their forever families sooner."

– Madelyn Pierce, AWAA

Step 3:

CHOOSE AN ADOPTION AGENCY



STEP 3: CHOOSE AN AGENCY

If you haven't already settled on an adoption agency by the time you choose between domestic and international adoption—and/or by the time you choose a country to adopt from—that's the last big question to answer as you get started.

Like I said, there's a lot of overlap between choosing a country and choosing an agency. But if you've settled on either domestic adoption or international and a country program, and are still on the fence about which agency to use, here are a few questions to ask and things to consider.

HOW TO CHOOSE AN ADOPTION AGENCY

There's a second tab in the spreadsheet to help keep track of some of this for you. Again, add columns for any other factors you want to compare.

How much is the application fee? We saw application fees between \$250 and \$350.

What is the total estimate for your country program? Again, this seemed more important when we started than it does now. Prices will vary a little bit, but in our experience it's fairly inconsequential.

Does the agency take care of travel arrangements? This may or may not be important to you, but it was to us. I'm normally not the kind of person to pay someone else to handle logistics, but when it comes to international travel to a country I've never been to for something as careful as this — I was happy to have someone with more experience set up as much as possible.

As I type this, we are just beginning to make travel arrangements, and I am so glad we chose an agency that is helping with this. There is still plenty for me to do (visas and airfare and fundraising), but I am beyond exhausted when it comes to paperwork and research. I have a lot of other things to do and think about, and the last thing I need on my plate right now is the pressure of trying to book safe accommodations and in-country travel for my family, in a country on the other side of the world.

Does the agency do home studies in your state? Some agencies are set up with social services so they can do your home study. Others have close relationships with other agencies, and can recommend someone they frequently work with. Still others will leave it all up to you. It's easier to work with an agency that does the home study too, because they have internal communication lines established.

STEP 3: CHOOSE AN AGENCY

What is the current, average wait time? This will depend a lot on your requests for adoption (if you're open to more medical needs, for example, or you're open to adopting a boy or an older child, the wait time is shorter), but you can outline some of your known preferences and get a general idea. Each agency works with a different number of families. A longer list may mean a longer wait time for you, coming in at the bottom.

What kind of results does their [country-of-choice] program produce? You can ask questions about how their internal process works, how long they've been working in the country you've chosen, how many children they placed in the previous year, etc.

What kind of post-adoption support is available? Different agencies offer different levels of support after you come home. It may not seem like a big deal, but it's good to have as many options available as possible. So far, every offer or opportunity we've had for "support" has initially seemed unnecessary, but I've already drawn on—and been thankful for—them all.

Additionally, read through the website. Read the "About Us" page and learn how the agency came to be, and what their priorities are. Read or watch the testimonials from other families that have used them.

Then **Google something negative about the agency you think you like:** "AGENCY failed," "don't use AGENCY," or "AGENCY is terrible." See if anything comes up. Because the agency isn't going to post bad experiences on their site, but you need to know if they're out there. And if you find something you don't like about an agency you were leaning toward, **ask them about it.** Send the representative you've been emailing a link and ask if anyone at the agency knows what that story is about. There are always two sides.

Finally, **note how quickly they respond to emails and return calls.** You're going to have a lot of questions and you're going to be working closely with these people for a long time. If they're not responding quickly during the "sales" process (before you sign a contract), it probably won't get better after you're officially signed up.

ADOPTION AGENCIES

There are lots. There are "the big ones" that will show up at the top of the list when you Google, and there are "small ones" that you might have to click over to page 2 or 3 for.

STEP 3: CHOOSE AN AGENCY

I was *told*, and you'd probably assume, that the "bigger" agencies would be less personal but maybe offer more services. You may also expect to pay a little more to a bigger organization that necessarily has more overhead. That was only partially our experience. One of the bigger agencies was pretty terrible about answering my emails ... but then so was one of the smaller ones. And while we went with a bigger agency, expecting slightly less personal care and attention, we've been treated like royalty.

So hit up Google and **crash international adoption groups on Facebook to ask parents for recommendations.**

Here are the ones I talked to in the beginning, and some of my notes:

AWAA — Our faves (although I have no basis for comparison). I can only tell you that everyone I have talked to – from the first couple reps who helped us choose a program, to the social worker who did our home study, to our family coordinator who got us through the thick of the paperwork, and now our travel coordinator who is helping us make plans – has been very nice, very helpful, and very quick to communicate. If we do this again, we will use AWAA again.

awaa.org

All God's Children — This group was a very close second for us. Again, everyone I talked to was awesome. In the end, it just came down to the level of assistance with travel arrangements.

allgodschildren.org

Great Wall China Adoption — They only work in China. They look like a great group, but I never got a response to my first email.

gwca.org

Holt International — Definitely one of the biggest of the big organizations. I know families who have used Holt and had good experiences. They were helpful, but slower to respond to my emails, so I crossed them off my list before I really worked with them much.

holtinternational.org

Nightlight Christian Adoptions — This group was great too, super helpful and efficient. I explained our situation and the intake coordinator identified three countries that would be a good fit, and connected me right to their internal reps for each of the three.

nightlight.org

STEP 3: CHOOSE AN AGENCY

YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY!

And this is where your new friends at your adoption agency take over. They will send you huge emails and PDFs full of details—probably outlined one step at a time. You will still get confused and overwhelmed, and that's when you email or call and ask for help. And they will help.

Your agency wants your adoption experience to be as awesome as possible.

Partially because they are awesome people who love putting children into good families. Partially because—let's be honest—your great experience is a sales and marketing tool for their organization.

The only other advice I can share is going to be about raising funds 'cause good golly you're probably going to need all the help you can get.

It's almost pointless to even think about grants until your home study is complete, because most of them want to see it. In the meantime, though, it's never too early to start fundraising. So that's what we'll do next.

Step 4:

ADOPTION FUNDRAISING TIPS



STEP 4: FUNDRAISING TIPS

For most of us, funding is a primary concern for an international adoption. First, let's get over some hangups, and then let's get to work.

IT IS OKAY TO FUNDRAISE FOR YOUR ADOPTION

If you have reservations about fundraising for an adoption, allow me to squash them right now.

I did too at first, and I totally understand: It feels like *you* are the one choosing to do this, so *you* should find a way to fund it without begging/harassing/drawing on/etc etc your family, friends, church community, etc. And you will find random blog posts and forum threads and social media memes from people who agree with that. They will say things like, "If you can't afford to adopt, you shouldn't adopt."

They are wrong.

They're wrong because most people can't "afford" an international adoption. I know few people who have \$40,000 that they just don't know what to do with. If the wealthy were the only people who adopted, the orphan crisis would be even more tragic than it already is.

They're wrong because they're focused solely on their own comfort, regardless of what they say. They don't want to help and they don't want to feel guilty for not helping. The fact is, there are countless children all over the world who need nothing more than loving homes and families, and the people who are uncomfortable with our fundraisers don't care. Not really.

Because if fundraisers is what it takes to put one orphan in a family, then fundraise your heart out. As a parent—in fact or in hope, depending on what your family currently looks like—you know you would do anything for your children. Anything except tiptoeing around someone else's offense.

Your child is waiting for you. Fundraise unapologetically.

YOUR COMMUNITY WANTS TO BE PART OF YOUR ADOPTION STORY

I get it. It feels presumptuous to say, "We're going on an adventure! Come with us!" But the people who don't want to come, won't. And the truth is, most people do.

Most people who know and love you are excited for you (or are at least oddly curious) and they want to help. **Fundraisers can be a great way to not only raise money, but also bring people into your story, raise awareness about the orphan crisis, and build community (for you and everyone else).**

STEP 4: FUNDRAISING TIPS

And if you're a person of faith, then you know that God calls us into community. He has a plan for the work he is going to do in other people through their obedient acts of giving, as well as what he's doing in your family.

If we're being honest, it's pride (sometimes disguised as false humility) that keeps Christians from reaching out to their God-ordained communities for help when they need it. I'll skip all the scripture about family, community, the body, etc., 'cause you know where they are and we've got funds to raise. *exits soapbox*

ADOPTION FUNDRAISING TIPS

There is an ever-growing list of specific fundraising ideas on the online version of this PDF (bit.ly/adoption-beginners-guide). But first, a few tips.

1. "INVITE," DON'T "ASK"

This is a mindset, not just a copyediting trick. Understand that the funds are out there, and that God has a plan to get them to you. You are not begging people to help you, **you are inviting them to go on an adventure with you.**

Because when they give, they are going with you. Jesus said that where a person's treasure is, there his heart will be also. When they buy a t-shirt or a raffle ticket, they invest, whether they intend to or not. They will most likely become more interested in your progress, your story, your child, etc., even if they didn't mean to and even if they don't realize the connection.

2. MIX UP FUNDRAISER TYPES

(More on these three types below) My advice for mixing it up is generally an investment, exchange, event, exchange, investment, etc. Most people won't just keep giving into a void, but people don't want to just keep buying stuff either. Start with an investment fundraiser at the beginning, then find some sort of product for an "exchange," then plan an event, then find another product, etc.

3. DO YOUR PART AND SHARE YOUR STORY

If you're inviting people into your adventure, you have to let them into more than just the finance department. Share as much of your journey as you are willing to (or more) in whatever way you are comfortable. Some ideas:

Start a blog. When you get to grant applications in a few months, a lot of them will ask for this URL if you have one, so bonus. If you've never done this before, there are lots of platforms that will let you do it easily, and for free. I like WordPress. I help a friend who uses Wix and it's pretty easy too.

STEP 4: FUNDRAISING TIPS

Set up a Facebook page. Go to where the people already are. Facebook pages are great options because people whom you might not want to actually connect with your personal account can still follow the journey, and because you can post updates and fundraisers without feeling like you're spamming your personal network with your adoption journey.

Start an email newsletter. If you're not comfortable putting your family online for all to see, start an email list. You can do text emails from your normal email server, or set up a free account with a service like MailChimp that will let you very easily set up pretty emails with pictures, etc. (and give you cool insights about how many people opened it, or clicked on links, etc.)

Set up a cadence and don't get lazy. Weekly emails or blog posts are pretty standard and you'll want to post *something* every couple days on social media. Consider it part of your adoption process. **The more you let people in, the more they will want to be in.**

4. BE AWARE OF THE SEASON

Pay attention to the season you and your community are in so you can avoid conflicts and so you can develop meaningful fundraisers.

People don't have time for events, for example, in December, but they will buy a cute/meaningful Christmas ornament. Kick off summer with a new t-shirt, celebrate traditional holidays from the country you are adopting from, provide jewelry in time for Valentine's Day, time a travel-related fundraiser for when you get travel approval, etc.

5. ALWAYS USE FUNDRAISERS TO TELL YOUR STORY

Fundraisers that tie into and tell your story make an emotional connection and draw people in. Always tie the fundraiser to the story: choose meaningful numbers, celebrate traditional holidays from your child's country, choose movies that highlight adoption or your child's country of origin, etc.

6. KEEP TRACK

This is hard when things get crazy, but do your best. I was good at this at first, and then it seemed less important so I slacked off, and then later I wished I hadn't. There's a "Donations" tab on the Adoption Resources spreadsheet to help you keep track.

7. SET UP AN ONLINE PAYMENT TOOL

We used PayPal because if people "Send money to friends" it doesn't charge a fee, you can set up a custom PayPal.me URL, it connects easily to our bank accounts, and we could accept credit/debit card payments on our phones. There are other options too, but make sure you can accept digital monies right away.

STEP 4: FUNDRAISING TIPS

3 TYPES OF ADOPTION FUNDRAISERS

There are essentially three “types” of fundraisers: investments, exchanges, and events.

INVESTMENT FUNDRAISERS

Investment fundraisers are the ones where you just ask. You set a goal and you ask. These are easier at the beginning of your adoption journey than at the end, because partners don’t get anything tangible in return for their investment. Some tips:

Choose numbers with meaning. Always tell a story. We asked for 30 people to give \$30 for National Adoption Awareness Month (\$1/day). You could ask for \$30 donations on your 30th birthday, or \$15 on your 15th anniversary, or \$84 for the 84 pieces of paper you just submitted for your dossier (example number, actually count the pages, it will mean more), etc.

Do this first. People get excited when you announce that you’re adopting. It’s a huge step. You will get offers for help. Harness that excitement. We found that this type of fundraiser was much harder to share after a year of fundraising.

Share progress (often). Simple text updates on your Facebook page, etc., are good. Graphics are better. Canva is a great (free) platform that even a noob can use easily. Create a simple “thermometer” can you can raise the red bar on. For a birthday campaign, we used a graphic that included 50 unlit birthday candles; every week I “lit” one candle (I deleted the small white box I had used to hide the flame in the image) for every \$X and posted the update.

EXCHANGE FUNDRAISERS

Exchanges are the fundraisers where you basically “sell” stuff. Your community gives financially and they get something—a t-shirt, a Christmas ornament, a clean car—in return. These don’t raise quite as much, of course, because there’s some cost involved, but there are lots of options here. Tips:

Plan ahead and schedule these well. Announce what’s coming next a week or two ahead of time.

Set a limit. If it’s something you’re making yourself, decide ahead of time how many you are going to make and make it clear. Decide how many you think you could actually “sell,” and then shave about 25% off that number. You don’t want leftovers and you do want to create a sense of scarcity. (This will help you too. If something goes really well you do not want to be working on back-orders for weeks.) If it’s a third-party, there will usually be a time limit, but if not, set one: available this month only, etc.

STEP 4: FUNDRAISING TIPS

“Charge” too much. You’re not starting a business, you’re raising funds, and people get that. If it’s something you’re making yourself, consider how much it might actually sell for in a store, and then double or triple it. If it’s a third-party product prices may already be set, but if not, pad the tag a bit.

Offer them as “thank you gifts.” This helps you remember that you’re inviting, not asking. And if you’re a stickler for tax laws, it keeps you in the clear. All of our handmade exchange items were, “thank you gifts for [MONTH] donations of \$X or more.” Now you’re not actually selling anything, just giving gifts to supporters and partners.

EVENT FUNDRAISERS

Events are ... events. These are sometimes a gamble because it’s hard to know how many people will actually attend. They’re also a much bigger effort to organize and pull off. You can do it with minimal financial investment, though, which means they can help raise some large sums.

Plan well in advance. Leave yourself a couple of months to promote this ahead of time. Depending on the event you’ll need time to collect raffle donations, sell tickets, etc., but also to build some excitement through your blog or newsletters, etc.

Deliver. You want to provide a good experience with every fundraiser, of course, but events even more. You are now inviting people to share their finances *and* their time (which is, arguably, more valuable), so make sure it’s worth it. This doesn’t mean spending lots of money (because: counter-productive), but be thoughtful and thorough and provide a fun, unique experience.

Step 5:

ADOPTION GRANT TIPS



STEP 5: GRANT TIPS

Most grant organizations want to see your finalized home study as part of the application process, so you'll have to wait until that piece is ready, but don't wait much longer.

(There is a complete list of available adoption grants, with my notes, on the spreadsheet that you can access at bit.ly/adoption-worksheet. You can also find a list at Step 5 online at bit.ly/adoption-beginners-guide.)

ADOPTION GRANT TIPS

I'm definitely not the most experienced or savvy at grant applications, but I did learn a lot along the way that I wish I had known earlier. So here's your head-start.

1. START ASAP

It's true you can't really start until you have a completed home study report in-hand, but if you really need grants, you can't afford to wait much longer after you have the home study.

Every grant organization works on a different schedule. Some open for applications and take the first X-number that come in. Some are always open, but they review quarterly, bi-annually, or annually. Some do their fundraising, open for applications when they hit a financial target, and then award grants until they run out of funds.

The point is, you never know where you're going to land in an organization's application cycle. If you have to wait months and months for a verdict, you don't want those months to be racing your travel date. Most grants will pay current fees, but they won't reimburse.

2. BLOCK OUT TIME

It's going to feel like you're applying for the adoption itself over and over and over again. Every application is different, and most are somewhat grueling. I set aside several hours every Saturday morning for grant applications and would usually get through one or two in that time. And I'm pretty darn organized. Grant applications are serious paperwork.

3. STAY ORGANIZED

Once you get your tax documents and cost estimates and budget numbers (and everything else) organized, be super diligent about keeping them that way. Almost every grant organization will ask you for line-by-line details about your income and expenses, adoption cost estimates, etc., but they all require it on their own forms.

Get your numbers organized however is easiest for you and then keep them updated. You don't want to have to hunt them down every single time. Tabs on the spreadsheet.

STEP 5: GRANT TIPS

4. APPLY FOR ALL THE GRANTS

Unless there's a fee and you really don't think your family/situation matches what the committee is looking for, apply for as many as you can, as soon as you can. I inquired or applied for about 50 grants, and got five.

Maybe your story is more compelling, your need is greater, etc., and your ratio will be better than 1:10. I hope it is ... but it might be 1:10.

5. APPLY FOR ALL THE GRANTS QUICKLY

Every grant application will ask you to list other grants you've applied for and which (if any) you've been awarded. I'm told that agencies and board members like to see a list, because it indicates that you're working hard to raise this money.

But, and this is just my hunch, it seems less inspiring to list a bunch of grants you've already been awarded.

Applying for grants quickly means you're going to type up a hefty list of applications you've submitted, with no awards to report (yet).

6. LEARN ABOUT THE GRANT BEFORE YOU APPLY

First, so you know if it is relevant to your family and your adoption situation. Grant committees look at *hundreds* of applications. They do NOT need to you apply for a grant that you clearly don't qualify for. You will not convince them that yours is a special case.

Second, so you know how to apply. Most applications will ask for a statement or testimony. Learn what's important to the committee, why the founders started this grant, what the organization's goals are, etc., so you can highlight those same values in your story.

7. KEEP THE COMMITTEE UPDATED

This is one I wish I had done more of. I assumed that the people behind the organizations did not want to be bombarded with my adoption updates, but in most cases that's not true. I actually had one ask me why I *hadn't* emailed them about something.

There is often one or two people keeping files together. Committees come together once every X months, and they want the latest information as they start making decisions. If you didn't have a referral when you originally applied, for example, and then you accept one, send a quick email with the update. It will give them the best info and it will keep you on their radar.

Note that some organizations specifically ask you NOT to contact them. So don't.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

RESOURCES

You got this! And when you feel like you don't got this, remember there are people who want to help you.

<https://bit.ly/adoption-beginners-guide>

The online version of this PDF. Sections 2 and 3 include links to country program and agency info that wouldn't fit here, and the lists of fundraiser ideas and grants are always being updated! Bookmark it and visit often.

<https://bit.ly/adoption-worksheet>

The spreadsheet that will help you do everything we've talked about. You'll have to copy/paste it into your own Google Sheet or download it as an Excel file to edit it.

@estherproject

My Instagram and Twitter. If you have questions or just need someone to remind you that you got this, hit me up. I will pump you full of confidence so you can go attack one more round of paperwork. Also, pics of my cute Chinese son are hella motivating.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Is it difficult? Yes. Having been through one unmedicated birth and one international adoption process, I can't honestly say which was harder. But I can say I've already considered doing both again. Because it's worth it.

If you're thinking about adoption, the answer is yes. James 1 tells us that "pure religion" is caring for widows and orphans. You can fund orphanages, and that's great work, but what orphans need are families. Nothing else comes close. Our God invented adoption and paid the highest price imaginable for his own adopted children. He's about it.

Early in our process, when we had no idea what to do or how to pay for it, the peace that anchored my soul was that we were leaving room for God to do a miracle. And I told the, "What if's that if the miracle didn't look like what I wanted, then I'd pay off debt for the rest of my life - but I would give an orphan a loving family in the meantime.

As I type the last page of this PDF, we are home from China with our new son. It is difficult, but there are no words for how amazing the whole process was - and is - too.

We're not doing a perfect job of any of it, and neither will you, but your child doesn't need *perfect*. He or she needs *you*.

I'd love to hear from you @estherproject. You got this.