

## **Section Two: The Home Study Process**

In this section the resource family will understand what a home study is (also called resource family assessment) and the basic components of a home study.

### **Introduction:**

Single and two-parent families who wish to be considered as adoptive or guardian families must complete a process called a home study (or resource family assessment). The home study process involves education and preparation; as well as, gathering of information about the prospective parents by a person called a home study writer. Ideally, the home study process helps to build knowledge, and create a partnership between the family and social workers.

If you are interested in adoption of special needs children, through the State of Alaska, your home study will be assigned for completion by your Regional Adoption Specialist. Currently (FY 2005) the State of Alaska contracts with Catholic Social Services and Fairbanks Counseling and Adoption to complete all adoption and guardianship home studies for legal risk and legally free adoptive families.

Adoption Preparation training is available on-site through the Alaska Center for Resource Families in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Fairbanks and Juneau. Attending on-site training is strongly recommended because it gives the adoptive family an opportunity to meet the Regional Adoption Specialist and the Alaska Adoption Support Center staff, other adoptive families and to interact and ask questions. Otherwise, reading and completing this self-study course helps to fulfill the educational component of the adoption home study process.



Adoptive and guardian families should also be asking questions of their OCS social worker, the home study writer, the Regional Adoption Specialist and the Alaska Adoption Support Center support staff, because it is very important to be as educated as possible prior to making a life long commitment to a child.

# **The Basics of an Adoption Home study (or resource family assessment)**

The home study itself is a written report that contains information about a family and recommendations of the home study writer, who has met with the applicants on several occasions, both individually and together for a two-parent family. The home study writer is usually a person who has at least a bachelor degree in Social Work and additional training in permanency planning and adoption. These meetings usually occur in the applicant's home, and include any other children residing with the family and others who may also live there.

The home study writer should be able to tell you an approximate date for completion of the written document. In general, the adoption or guardianship home study covers the following components:

- ✓ Personal and family background-including sibling relationships, key events and what you learned from them
- ✓ Marriage and family relationships
- ✓ Motivation for adoption-including any aspects of infertility
- ✓ If child specific-what are the child's special needs and how family meets the needs of this child
- ✓ If a Native Alaskan child is being considered, how the family meets the placement preferences outlined in the Indian Child Welfare Act
- ✓ Parenting and integration of the child into the family
- ✓ The family environment and the community setting
- ✓ Physical health, and mental health history of applicants
- ✓ Education, employment and finances-including insurance coverage and child care plans if needed
- ✓ At least three references and criminal background checks, using fingerprint cards
- ✓ Summary and recommendations for adoption or guardianship

**Autobiographical information: Personal and family background-including sibling relationships, key events and what you learned from them; marriage and family**

**relationships, parenting and integration of the child into your family, motivations, your family environment, and community.**

The Autobiographical information contains all of the elements listed above and is essentially key elements about your life. Your home study writer often provides you with a form to complete and will also gather this information through the interview process. You may be asked to talk about how you were raised and by whom, the style of parenting you received, your siblings (if any), and any other events that impact your ability to parent or your perspectives on adoption.

The statements that you make may answer many questions necessary for the home study document. The home study writer will ask you to talk about your relationship with your parents and siblings and what support systems you currently have. The writer will want to know what kinds of parenting techniques you use and the different aspects of your current children, if any. Be prepared to talk about your current educational level, any further aspirations, your job, your employment history and any plans to change employment.

If you are married the writer will ask you questions about your marriage. These may cover how you met the other parent, how long you dated, what attracted you to the other parent, how you resolve your differences, what you see as the other parent's strengths and weaknesses. If you are not married, the writer will want to know about your social life and how you anticipate integrating a child into it; as well as, any plans for a relationship or about dating habits. If you have been married previously, there will be questions about that marriage.

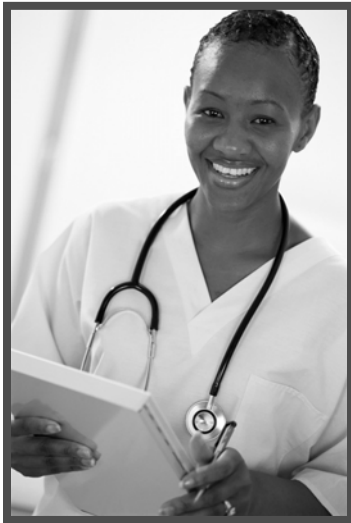


The interview will also contain questions about your ordinary routines such as a description of your typical work day and/or weekend, your interests, and your activities. The home study writer may also ask you questions about your experiences with other's children and the support systems you may have in place, including some "what if" questions which add insight into how you may handle particular situations.

There may also be a section on specific adoption related topics and issues, which may include questions about your motivation to adopt and/or your interest in adopting a specific child. If your home study is not focused on a specific child, you will be asked about the characteristics, age, special needs and so on of the child you are interested in adopting. And you will be asked about any other religious or cultural practices, your level of practice, and if you were raised with these beliefs or cultural systems.

The home study process is also designed to assist in bringing to light aspects that perhaps you have not thought about. You may not know all of the answers to some questions-and that is okay! The home study writer should also offer you other resources, experiences, and places to find answers.

## Health Statements



The State of Alaska requires all adoptive families to complete a statement of their physical and mental health. Health issues may or may not prevent a person from adopting-it depends on the nature, duration, life expectancy, and if the health problem interferes with parenting. Primarily, the home study writer needs to verify that the adoptive applicant is generally healthy, has a normal life expectancy, and is physically and emotionally capable of handling the care of a child. If you have a medical condition, but are under a doctor's care, and that condition is under control (for instance if you have high diabetes that is controlled by medication) you can probably still be approved as an adoptive family. A serious health problem that impacts life expectancy may prevent approval as an adoptive parent.

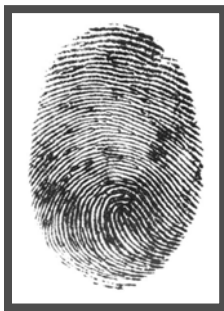
Treatment for mental health issues does not preclude someone from becoming an adoptive parent. The nature of the illness, the treatment history of the illness and impact on their life and potential impact on a child are all issues the home study writer will want to examine. You may be asked to provide statements from physicians and mental health professionals attesting to your current condition, treatment and future expectations.

## Income statement

The home study writer will want you to verify your employment by providing a statement (this is a form) from your employer. You will also be asked about other resources, savings, retirement, assets and any other financial factor that weighs into financial stability. You will need to show how much it costs you to live, such as rent or mortgage costs, fuel, food, car payment, insurance and so on. Adoption of children does not require that the applicant be well-off, however, it is important to show that you can manage your finances responsibly and that you have sufficient financial resources to care for a child.



## Child Abuse and Criminal Clearances



The State of Alaska requires that all adoptive or guardian applicants complete child abuse and criminal background clearances. You will be provided with a set of fingerprint cards and instructions on how to proceed, by either your social worker or the home study writer, for every person in your home over the age of 16. In most places, public safety offices can “roll” your finger prints. *If you are already licensed as a foster parent, this process has already been completed. Unless you are asked otherwise, you will not need to repeat this step. OCS will provide the home study writer with verification that your fingerprint results are on file.*

When you submit the application for adoption, the social worker will also complete a child abuse history check on all members of your household. The social worker will also provide the home study writer with verification that this process has been completed and any significant information required for the report.

Misdemeanor offences committed long ago for which there is a believable explanation (for example, “I was young and dumb, and did what everyone else seemed to be doing”) usually are not held against you for adoptive purposes; however, a felony conviction or any charge involving children or illegal substances would most likely not be tolerated. Some other criminal history will prevent you from being an adoptive parent. If you have been convicted of physical or sexual abuse of a child or an adult, you will not be able to

adopt children. If you have a substantiated report of child sexual abuse, you will not be able to adopt children.

## **References**

The State of Alaska requires at least three references, which includes names, addresses and phone numbers of individuals you select. Choose references who know you well; such as close family friends, church members or co-workers. If possible, they should be people who have known you for several years. You should not list family members such as siblings, aunts and uncles or grandparents. In some cases a relative may be acceptable particularly in small, remote communities. A relative's opinion is often considered biased under most circumstances. If you have children, another parent makes a good reference. The home study writer will either send your references a questionnaire or talk directly with them, asking questions about you. These questions may address aspects such as your experience with children, the stability of your relationship, and any known motivations for adoption.

References are used to obtain a more complete picture of the adoptive applicant. References are generally quite supportive of the applicant; and negative statements are rare, but do occur. Sometimes references may disclose domestic violence or a substance abuse problem which requires further follow-up on behalf of the home study writer.

## **Interviews**

The home study writer will likely schedule several visits with you and your family members (if applicable). The purpose of the home visit is to create a visual picture of you and your environment for the home study document. You will be asked questions about information you provided in your autobiographical statement (if you wrote one or filled out a form). In the case of couples, some interviews will be scheduled jointly and some separately, depending on the style of the writer.

It is very important for you to understand that the home study writer is not visiting your home to see if it is clean, or tidy. The writer simply needs to verify that the environment they may be approving for an adoptive child is safe and healthy and that the family has thought ahead about how they will accommodate a new member to the family. The

writer will want to walk through your home to see sleeping areas and accommodations for a new family member (if any).

If the child is already placed in your home, the writer will be observing all family member interactions with the child to determine the level of attachment, freedom of movement, comfort and response to child's needs (to name a few of the observations).

It is natural to be very nervous about the home visit-but try to relax! Most often, the home study writer will talk with you and your family for an extended period of time and will put you at ease. It is important to be honest with the home study writer, he/she does not expect perfection! These writers are very experienced and know that all people are a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, it would not be wise to present your family or situation in a deceptive or dishonest manner because if discovered, this would betray any trust that the social worker had and could prevent you from being an adoptive placement.

## **Children in Your Home**

If you already have children, either by birth, fostering or through adoption, they will be included in the home study process. Older children will be interviewed and may even be invited to attend training sessions. The home study writer will assess the impact that adding another child to the family will have on the children in the home. The children may be asked about their feelings and preferences for adoptive children.



The home study writer may ask the children how they do in school, what their interests and hobbies are, what their friends are like, and how they get rewarded or disciplined for good for not-so-good behavior. However, the overall emphasis will be on how the child sees a new person fitting into the family and whether they are prepared to share you with the new potential sibling.

## **Other Considerations**

Flexibility and a sense of humor are vital characteristics when raising children and they are useful when going through the home study process. As an example, if you can demonstrate flexibility in your work place by taking off an hour early to meet the home

study writer to be sure things go smoothly, this will transfer into the potential accommodations that you will need to make for your future adoptive child. Using laughter and humor when aspects do not go smoothly will also carry adoptive parents more easily through their journey.

For families wishing to adopt “special needs children” through the State of Alaska, the majority of the costs are covered by the State. The training, support and preparation services are provided free of charge for foster, adoptive and guardian families seeking children through the State of Alaska. Private adoption agencies will charge a fee of \$1000.00 to \$2000.00 for an adoption home study, and other fees may be as great as \$25,000.00. Through the State of Alaska adoptions, a nominal fee may be charged for adoption home studies and this cost is reimbursed to the family as part of the non-reoccurring costs provision provided for subsidized adoptions. If you have more questions or need information about the cost for your home study (if any), and the reimbursement of the cost, talk to your Regional Adoption Specialist.

## **What is an Adoption Homestudy: “Who is this Person with the White Gloves in my House?”**

*Written by Elaine Cordova, MS., Family Support Specialist, Alaska Adoption Support Center, 2005.*

Many years ago when I was a new adoption worker one of my first assignments was the task of interviewing prospective adoptive parents and writing their adoption home studies. 23-years old with a newly acquired degree, unmarried, childless, I was sent out into the world. My first homestudy interview saw me sitting at a family’s dining room table, trying to be focused and professional, while at the same time ignoring the family pet parakeet as it flew around my shoulders trying to get my attention. It finally perched itself on the rim of my coffee cup and left a “welcoming gift.” Unsure of what the social work etiquette book would say, I smiled and continued the interview process. The second homestudy was conducted in rural Alaska where I was dropped off at a forlorn looking landing strip by the Cessna 180. As it faded into the sky the sound of the airplane’s engine was soon replaced by the hum of a snow machine. With a combination of apprehension, and devil-may care, I flung a leg over the back of the snow machine and clung to the newly introduced driver with one arm and my brief case with the other. We made our way to yet another dining room table to talk about the family’s reason for pursuing adoption.

These experiences and many more in the years between then and now have taught me much about adoption and about families, but perhaps the most important thing I've learned is how many emotions families can have when they find themselves faced with "getting an adoption home study." Little did I know that those early families were probably more nervous and unsure of themselves than I was. For some people filling out paperwork, gathering documentation, obtaining background checks, and then inviting a stranger into their home to ask personal and sometimes uncomfortable questions can be pretty invasive. There is often a sense that someone will be running the white glove test not only on their home, but on their lives, poking and prodding in 'their business.' Being put under the microscope is not a particularly comfortable experience for anyone, but it is even more acute for those who have a desire to become parents through adoption – and feel they must pass a test where the rules are unclear. Feelings of apprehension and anger can accompany the homestudy experience. One adoptive parent described the feeling as being similar to getting on a bus blindfolded, with an unknown driver, traveling toward an unknown route, sometimes going faster than comfortable – or standing still even when the traffic light has turned green. Often times people's discomfort comes from not knowing what an adoption homestudy is, but anticipating it to be a hoop to be jumped, a scrutiny, a test, and evaluation of their parenting and their lives.

So, if it is not those things, *what is an adoption home study?* The adoption homestudy is a legal requirement prior to adoption. Eventually, after being read by the contract agency, if there is one, by the child's social worker, the Regional Adoption Specialist and the Juneau office, it will be included as part of the petition to the court for the finalization of the adoption.

From a home study writer's point of view the adoption home study is, at its best, a self learning tool where, families are able to discover their own strengths and also better understand where they may have specific challenges in parenting. Ideally, the interview will help the family explore their own values and expectations around family life and their motivation for adoption, I have heard many families say that they actually *liked* the homestudy process - that it gave an opportunity for reflection and they ended up learning a lot about themselves and their mates.

But, another question: *Who is a homestudy writer and what is his or her role?* An adoption home study writer is an individual contractor, generally trained by a child placement agency such as Catholic Social Services in Anchorage, or Fairbanks Counseling and Adoption in Fairbanks, for the purpose of interviewing, educating, and assessing the strengths of a family pursuing adoption or guardianship. She/he is most often a Masters level professional with adoption experience who can facilitate the learning process of a family, answer questions on such topics as the effects of grief and loss for a child, the importance of maintaining cultural connections, or instruct about the effects of prenatal drugs and alcohol on a child. But, more than that she/he is a tour guide for your adoption ‘bus ride’ and can guide the way through the unfamiliar territory of the Office of Children’s Services or the legal court process.

This attitude is a far cry from the image of a family waiting in trepidation for a white gloved social worker to scrutinize you and look for dust bunnies under the beds. The question then becomes; how do I take off the blind fold, chart my own adoption course, and get behind the driver’s seat of the bus? Here are some take-charge thoughts:

If in doubt, ask questions about what will happen during the home study (or resource family assessment) process. Clarify the steps so you know what to expect. Ask specifically what you will be responsible for. Take notes. Be sure to understand timelines.

Remember the quip: *Nothing about me, without me...*” Read the draft of the homestudy – you have that right and responsibility to know what is being written about you – and, if you feel it necessary, to give feedback.

And, lastly: Tidy the house, but forget about the dust bunnies. You have more important things to think about. If your homestudy writer arrives for that first interview wearing white gloves ask to take her coat *and her gloves!*