



MARE Guide for Waiting Families

MARE's Guide for Waiting Families was created by Julie Gallo, Boston College School of Social Work Graduate Student Intern 2003-2004 (updated January 2007).

Welcome

Congratulations on your decision to become an adoptive parent and your completion of both the Massachusetts Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) training and the homestudy process. You are now a waiting family who is one step closer to bringing a new child or children into your home. You may be wondering, what is the next step? How long will this process take? Is there anything I can do to make this waiting process easier for my social worker and myself?

This booklet is designed for waiting families to assist them in understanding the foster care adoption process and outlining actions that waiting families can take. Some families experience frustration and anxiety during this waiting time because they are not sure what they should be doing. This booklet will outline the stages of adoption, recommend actions you can take, discuss MARE's services specifically for waiting families, and provide resources. The role of your social worker will also be described, advice from adoption social workers will be given, and post adoption services such as financial assistance and resources will be described.

Adoption is a lifelong process for every family. Hopefully, this booklet will help you in making your way through the "waiting stage" of the adoption process.

About MARE

Who is MARE?

The Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange, Inc. (MARE) is a private, non-profit organization. MARE works in collaboration with agencies in the child welfare system; specifically both public (MA Department of Children and Families or DCF) and DCF contracted private adoption agencies, to find adoptive families for children in foster care. MARE is contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF) to act as the sole adoption exchange for the state. DCF and its contracted agencies register waiting children and approved homestudied families with MARE to receive the benefits of MARE's programs and services. MARE is not a placement agency and most of the agency's work is conducted with the children's social workers.

MARE History

MARE was established in 1957 as a result of an annual meeting of the Massachusetts Conference of Social Welfare, held in 1954. During this session, the lack of adoption resources available for "hard to place" children, more specifically older children, children of color, children with physical and/or intellectual disabilities, and sibling groups was brought to light. A committee was formed to study adoption practices in Massachusetts, including policies and procedures. The committee's findings recommended the establishment of a state adoption exchange to facilitate adoptions for children with special needs.

On October 1, 1957, with \$10,000 in funding from the Children's Mission (predecessor of Parents' and Children's Services), as well as office space and equipment donated by Boston Children's Service Association, the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange began its work in special needs adoption. It was established as a trust under the Massachusetts Conference on Social Welfare to carry out the statewide service of arranging adoption placements through the exchange of information and resources among public and private agencies. MARE is unique in being the only exchange in the country to have been started under the auspices of both private and public agencies.

MARE is a small agency, consisting of only thirteen full-time staff members, two of whom are located in the DCF Springfield Office. MARE is headed by an Executive Director and a Board of Directors.

MARE's Mission

MARE exists to find "a place to call HOME" for CHILDREN in foster care, including sibling groups and children who are traditionally harder to place. We do this by recruiting, educating, supporting and advocating for FAMILIES throughout the adoption process.

The Adoption Process in Massachusetts

Now that you know who we are and what our mission is, let's talk about the process of adopting a child from foster care. As you learned in MAPP, adoption involves children who are in the custody of the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families. The majority of these children are ages six and older, children of color, sibling groups, children with intellectual, physical, or emotional difficulties or disabilities, and children at legal risk. MARE works in collaboration with DCF and private agencies contracted by DCF to find loving homes for these children. As homestudied, waiting families, you have already completed both your MAPP training and homestudy so let's move on to the next step, the matching process.

Waiting

Waiting can be very difficult for many families. You have completed both your homestudy and MAPP training and are ready to adopt. You cannot wait to meet the new addition to your family and are ready to open your hearts and life to this child. Although waiting can be frustrating, a positive attitude, open mind, and an abundance of patience can help families in finding the child that is right for them.

Waiting families need to be realistic about how long they will wait for a child. Foster care adoption usually takes an average of one to two years, from making the initial inquiry to having a child placed in the family's home. One of the main factors affecting this time period can be the type of child the family seeks to adopt. Families who seek to adopt younger children with less needs tend to wait longer because there are fewer of these children available. You will also wait longer if you are only considering children who are legally free. Older children, children of color, sibling groups and those with significant needs are the majority of children who are waiting to be adopted.

Allow yourself the time to assess what type of child would be a good match for your family. This is an important decision that should not be rushed. Also, remember that during this time it is appropriate to say no for whatever reason if a child is not a good fit for your family. It may be helpful for you to develop support systems and resources during this time. Network with social workers and attend groups to hear from other waiting families who are going through similar situations. During this free time, you should also focus on other important aspects of your life. Visit friends and family; take a vacation; or learn a new language. This will take your mind off the anxiety of waiting and remind you of all the positives in your life.

Matching Process

Now that you have been approved to adopt, you should have a copy of your homestudy. At this point, your social worker will begin to look for children to match with your family. Matching is a process that takes place over a period of time. Sometimes this period of time can be the longest and most frustrating part of the adoption process. As a waiting family, you can do some searching on your own utilizing many of MARE's resources (see below). Another important way to expedite the matching process is to stay in touch with your social worker. Keeping your social worker updated will let him or her know that you are being proactive in your search. It will also keep you in your social worker's mind when he or she is thinking of potential matches.

Disclosure & Visitation

Once a child has been identified that may be a good match for your family, you will be asked to participate in a disclosure meeting. During this meeting, a family meets with their social worker and the child's social worker to discuss the child in more detail and become familiar with the child's history and current issues. You will be given documents to go home and read and contact numbers for foster parents, teachers, therapists, etc. If you feel comfortable moving forward after this, an initial meeting will be arranged so that you can meet the child. If this meeting goes well, a visitation schedule will be set up that starts with short visits and gradually moves to overnight visits. This period of visitation varies but typically lasts from two to five months.

Pre-Adoptive Placement

Following the visitation period, the child will move into your home on a full-time basis. In Massachusetts, a child must live in your home for a minimum of six months before the adoption is legalized (finalized) in court. However, in many instances, it will be longer than six months before the adoption is legalized. During this time, a social worker will continue to visit your home to provide support and assess how the placement is going. A distinction between legally free and legal risk children should also be made. Legally free children are those whose birthparents have voluntarily surrendered their parental rights, or have had them terminated through a court process. After all legal appeals have been completed, these birthparents have no legal recourse or claim to the involved children. If the child is legally freed, the adoption can be finalized. However, children at legal risk are not yet legally free for adoption. If the child is at legal risk, you can only finalize after the birth parents' rights have been terminated by the courts or surrendered voluntarily.

Mediation and Open Adoption

Most of the children who are being adopted from foster care have formed significant relationships with members of their birth family, friends, neighbors, foster families and other people in their lives. When a child is placed in his or her pre-adoptive home, it is in the child's best interest to be able to maintain these connections whenever safe and appropriate. This is known as open adoption. Open adoption can be described best as a continuum, with regular visits on one end and cards/letters and pictures being exchanged on the other end. You can speak to your social worker and the child's social worker about what makes sense in your individual situation. Open adoption agreements must be filed before the adoption is legalized, and they are legally binding.

For children who are at legal risk, an alternative to a contested court proceeding is known as "mediation" or Cooperative Adoption Planning (CAP). Children's Services of Roxbury/Massachusetts Families for Kids is the lead agency for the Massachusetts Trial Court's statewide permanency mediation program. This process is facilitated by a trained, independent third party to assist the birth parent(s) in planning for their child's future even when he or she is unable to be a full-time parent. Mediators support building relationships between birth and permanent parents and facilitate their designing a child-specific permanency plan. Please talk to your social worker to see if mediation is an appropriate option in your individual situation.

Finalization

This is the day that you and your child have been waiting for. Your child's adoption is legally recognized and ratified by a judge in court. Finalization establishes the rights and responsibilities of the adoptive parents, as well as the rights that the adoptive child will have.

Things to do while you Wait

Although you will wait, there are steps that you can take with your social worker and on your own that will make the waiting period less frustrating and more productive. MARE, the Department of Children and Families and the contracted agencies provide opportunities for waiting families throughout the state. These opportunities educate individuals about foster care adoption as well as facilitate the adoption process.

1. Attend Conferences, Support Groups & Special Events

Meetings and special events are hosted frequently by MARE and other organizations. Waiting families can meet with social workers and experienced adoptive parents and sit in on workshops that address various aspects of adoption such as the process, sibling groups, legal risk and post adoption services.

Support groups are also held for individuals involved in all stages of the adoption process. Adoptive Families Together (AFT), which is a program of MSPCC, is a network of

adoptive families who host support groups for families at all stages of the adoption process and who have adopted through all different routes. These groups are held in the New England area. To contact AFT, call 617-587-1500 or visit www.mspcc.org and look under Program & Services/Adoption/Adoptive Families Together. Additional support groups for individuals and families touched by adoption are posted on the events section of the MARE website (www.mareinc.org).

2. Talk to other adoptive families

Whether it's mingling with other families at MARE adoption parties or exchanging information at support groups, waiting families can learn so much from one another. It's also reassuring to know that you are not alone and that others have gone through the waiting period for a child and have experienced the same excitement and anxiety you feel. It can also be beneficial to talk with experienced adoptive families who have adopted a child similar to the one you are waiting for. These families can provide a wealth of information. From a parent's point of view, they can discuss their experiences and resources they utilized. If you contact MARE's office, we can put you in touch with other adoptive parents and support groups.

3. Read

The more you read, the more prepared you will be as an adoptive parent. As a waiting parent, you can take this time to learn more about waiting children. Ask to be placed on the mailing list for the MARE newsletter, which will keep you up to date on current MARE events and services. You can also find the Tapestry book catalog at www.tapestrybooks.com. The public library and Internet are also good sources for finding information that addresses parenting and adoption. Also, go to the resources section in this booklet (starting on page 17) for detailed information about organizations, clearinghouses and literature focusing on foster care adoption.

MARE Services for Waiting Families

Register with MARE

Families from Massachusetts who have been homestudied and approved to adopt a child from foster care should register with MARE. You can either contact MARE at 617-54-ADOPT (617-542-3678) or 1-800-882-1176 for a registration form, or register online at www.mareinc.org under the Family Info section. You can either submit your information online and then mail or fax your homestudy or you can download the form, complete it and then fax it to MARE at 617-542-1006. There is no fee for this service through which a registered family's criteria is compared with registered children to identify potential matches. When a match is identified, MARE forwards a copy of the family's homestudy directly to the child's social worker for consideration.

Adoption Information and Referrals

MARE provides information and referrals related to adoption. Staff are on call Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to answer general or child-specific inquiries.

View the MARE Photolisting every month

The MARE Photolisting® is a book that contains biographical descriptions and photographs of children who are registered with MARE and are available for adoption. The MARE Photolisting® is located in numerous public libraries and adoption agencies throughout the state. Call MARE to find a specific location. Each month, MARE sends out pages of newly registered children along with updates on the status of children already in the Photolisting.

If you find a child who you are interested in, contact MARE and provide us with the child's name and Photolisting page number. We will be able to tell you whether the child is still available for adoption and will put you in touch with the child's social worker. Monthly pages and updates from the MARE Photolisting can be mailed to you for a small annual fee.

Create a Family Profile

Families with completed and approved homestudies are encouraged to partner with their social worker to create a Family Profile that can be shared with social workers at MARE events such as Single Parent Matching Nights and Adoption Parties. Guidelines for profiles and an example can be found on MARE's website at www.mareinc.org.

Sign up for MARE Mailing Lists

By signing up for the mailing lists, you will receive *Exchange News*, MARE's quarterly newsletter, informational flyers regarding upcoming adoption parties, single parent matching nights and other upcoming events.

Come to MARE Adoption Parties

Adoption parties offer a great opportunity for waiting families to meet with waiting children, other waiting families, newcomers to the adoption process and experienced adoptive families. Waiting families can mingle and talk with others who are having similar experiences; obtain advice from experienced families; and act as resources for new families. This involvement can help waiting families feel more connected to the adoption community and less isolated in their waiting.

Some waiting families may not want to attend adoption events to meet with children. They may not feel comfortable with the idea or are not yet ready to interact with the children. Remember you do not have to attend adoption parties solely to meet waiting children. You should attend adoption parties to talk with your social worker (if he or she is present) and to network with other social workers. These events provide a good opportunity where questions can be addressed and more connections can be made.

For waiting families who would like to interact with some of the children, adoption parties may help speed up the matching process. As a result of meeting children in person, families may feel a connection with a certain child. Social workers may also think of possible connections they had not thought of before. Some social workers use adoption parties as a first visit. Waiting families can be casually introduced to the child in a fun, relaxed setting, which can lessen the anxiety between a family and a child during a first meeting.

At the adoption party, introduce yourself to the children's workers and relax and have a good time with the children. It is suggested that families dress casually, utilize the information table, and participate in the day's events. Feel free to interact with the children and talk to them about things they enjoy doing. Work on arts and crafts with them or play basketball. However, don't worry if you do not feel comfortable at this point interacting with the children. It's perfectly fine to observe and interact more with the other families and social workers present.

If you choose to interact with the children, it is important that you do not talk to the child about foster care, adoption, or the child's birth family. These are very personal issues. You should also not make any promises and should always be honest. Discuss with your social worker ways to appropriately answer tough questions posed by children. Also, it is recommended that you do not touch the children during the event. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to seek out a social worker or MARE staff person.

If you are interested in a certain child, remember to get their social worker's name and phone number. You can then call the social worker during the workweek to express your interest in the child and to ask any questions you may have. In this way, you are not having conversations with the social worker in the presence of the child who may know you are talking about him or her and feel confused about what this means.

MARE hosts four to six adoption parties per year in various locations throughout the state. Please check the Events page of the MARE website (www.mareinc.org) or call MARE to be put on the mailing list.

Attend MARE Single Parent Matching Nights

MARE hosts these informal gatherings designed specifically for homestudied single prospective parents. These informative nights allow social workers and single prospective adoptive parents to interact, share information and learn from one another. The night begins with an experienced single adoptive parent who shares his or her story and provides information on resources. Social workers then present specific waiting children who are appropriate for single parent homes. They present children through verbal descriptions, pictures, videos and other methods. Visit the Events page of the MARE website (www.mareinc.org) or call MARE to be added to the mailing lists for these meetings.

Watch for MARE Media Recruitment Campaigns

Sometimes reading about or seeing a waiting child on television can spark an interest about this particular child for a waiting family. MARE is responsible for coordinating many child-specific media recruitment features. If you should read about or see a child that you are interested in, please call us for a referral to the child's social worker. Also, additional media recruitment may be employed in the future, so please feel free to ask about media outlets in your area when calling us.

MARE's Media Recruitment

Television

Wednesday's Child is a weekly television recruitment program hosted by Jack Williams on the CBS4 Boston News. Only New England's legally free children are featured each week during the Wednesday 6:00 p.m. newscast. Read profiles and view the actual TV segments of the children featured at <http://wbztv.com/wednesday/> (link to this page).

En Busca de Hogar is a monthly Spanish television recruitment program hosted by Sara Suarez on the Univision New England News. Only New England's legally free children are featured on the third Thursday of every month at the 6:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. newscasts.

Newspapers

The Boston Parents' Paper hosts a monthly recruitment feature of legally free children.

The Boston People's Voice hosts a biweekly recruitment column featuring legally free children of African American descent.

The Daily Hampshire Gazette hosts a bi-monthly monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the second and fourth Saturday of the month. The paper is distributed in Western Massachusetts.

The Daily Times Chronicle hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The Dorchester Community News hosts a biweekly recruitment column. The paper is published every other Friday and features only legally free children.

El Mundo is a Spanish newspaper which features legally free children of Latino descent on a "space available" basis.

The Free Bird Times hosts a monthly recruitment column featuring legally free or legal risk children. The paper is distributed in Southeastern Massachusetts and on Cape Cod.

The Lynnfield Villager hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The No. Reading Transcript hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

La Semana is a Spanish newspaper which features legally free children of Latino descent on a “space available” basis.

Rumbo hosts a biweekly column featuring legally free children of Latino descent. The column is printed in English and Spanish.

Siglo 21 hosts a biweekly column featuring legally free children of Latino descent. The column is printed in Spanish.

The Stoneham Independent hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

Sunday’s Child is a weekly recruitment column in the Sunday Boston Globe. Individual children and sibling groups are featured, both legally free and legal risk.

The Taunton Daily Gazette hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the last Thursday of the month.

Today’s Child is a weekly recruitment column in the Sunday Boston Herald. Individual children and sibling groups are featured, both legally free and legal risk. The column is coordinated by DCF Public Affairs, but MARE handles all inquiry calls.

The Wilmington & Tewksbury Town Crier hosts a monthly recruitment feature. A legally free child or sibling group is featured on the third Wednesday of the month in the Middlesex East circular.

The Worcester Telegram and Gazette hosts a monthly recruitment column. Only legally free children are featured in the column that is published the last Sunday of the month.

Internet Resources for Waiting Families

The Internet allows waiting families to access up-to-date information quickly and conveniently. Also, pictures and descriptions of some of today’s waiting children are now available on the Internet. Children who are pictured on the Internet are legally free for adoption.

MARE’s Website (www.mareinc.org)

The MARE website is filled with information about adoption from foster care, MARE services to assist waiting parents, and resources. There is also information for waiting parents about upcoming events, workshops and trainings. Portions of the website are also available in Spanish. All of the Web services listed are provided at no charge.



MARE's Online Photolisting

Waiting families can view a partial listing of children in Massachusetts who are available for adoption online. Pictures along with information about the child are posted. For children listed online, you can also complete an information request form or call MARE to receive further information about a child. For a more complete listing of children in Massachusetts who are available for adoption, you can visit one of the many public libraries that carry the MARE Photolisting®. To view the MARE online Photolisting, go to www.mareinc.org and go to the Family Info section.

MARE's Online Matching

Families now have the opportunity to do an online search for children they may be interested in adopting. Using the MARE website, families can describe what kind of child or children they are interested in adopting and search for children who have been registered with MARE. You will be asked to create an account with your email address, a password and some basic family contact information. Once you have done this, you can conduct a search and make inquiries to MARE about particular children. Families also have the option to create a family "Profile", which indicates the characteristics of the child or children they are interested in adopting. From this profile, MARE will send automatic email notification of the child or children who meet the description in the profile. To view MARE's online matching, go to www.mareinc.org and go to the Family Info section.

AdoptUsKids Website (www.adoptuskids.org)

AdoptUsKids is a national database of children awaiting adoption and families approved to adopt. The AdoptUsKids website allows families to search for children and social workers to search for families throughout the United States. The site also includes comprehensive adoption information for families and many features to assist social workers. AdoptUsKids is an initiative of the Children's Bureau, which is being operated by the Adoption Exchange Association. You will find over 3,000 waiting children from across the U.S. on this website. Anyone can view the children on the website, but to find out more about a particular child, including contact information for the child's agency or social worker, you must have a current homestudy in the state where you live and become a site member.

Behind the Scenes: What is your social worker's role?

Adoption social workers and family resource social workers work very hard to make the right connections between waiting children and families. Adoption social workers work directly with children in the foster care system. They work to actively recruit families for these children. Family resource social workers work directly with families and hold MAPP trainings, conduct and prepare homestudies and license homes for foster care and adoption. Further, family resource social workers review all of the homestudies and

decide which homestudies are sent to a child's adoption social worker. Once the adoption social worker receives these homestudies, this social worker along with his or her supervisor will make the final decision as to which family can best meet the child's needs.

In terms of networking, adoption social workers and family resource social workers attend statewide matching meetings three to four times a year. The purpose of these meetings is for adoption social workers across the state to present waiting children to social workers who have waiting families. These meetings also present a great time for social workers to network and individually discuss children and families on their caseloads.

Family resource social workers also host informal meetings in different parts of the state. Social workers present waiting children and waiting families are invited to these meetings. This is another great opportunity for waiting parents to network, talk with their social workers and others and keep up to date of some of the children waiting for homes.

Both family resource social workers and adoption social workers are constantly networking with colleagues about waiting families and children. Also, thanks to the Internet, family resource social workers and adoption social workers are in constant contact with one another through email.

MARE is very appreciative of the consistent commitment we receive from family resource social workers and adoption social workers throughout the state. These workers regularly attend MARE coalition meetings, MARE Adoption parties, Single Parent Matching Nights and other informational events. Social workers help in leading workshops about the adoption process, subsidies and post adoption services at MARE adoption parties and other events.

Advice from Adoption Social Workers

This next section is advice from adoption social workers to help waiting families successfully navigate their way through the waiting period. A recurring piece of advice from social workers is that waiting families need to be patient and flexible but also proactive.

Be Realistic

Adoption is a lifelong commitment and families have to be introspective and honest with themselves about adopting through foster care. Families need to know what they can and cannot handle. It may be hard in the beginning because you are excited and feel that you could possibly handle any child. It is hard to decide that there are certain children who may not work well with your family. However, you must carefully evaluate who you are as a family and what you are specifically looking for in a child.

You do not need to say yes to every child because you feel that it makes you a better family. Are you looking for an infant with little to no special needs, a sibling group, or an older child? Let your social worker know specifically what you are looking for. Think of what age range would work for you. There may be certain behaviors that you can handle while there will be others that you cannot. Most importantly, do not rush into a situation.

Take time and be honest with yourself. Evaluate for yourself whether this particular child is right for you in this instance.

If you find that there are not many children waiting who would fit well with your family, perhaps adoption through the foster care system is not right for your family. You may instead want to look into domestic infant or international adoption.

Children at Legal Risk

Think about whether you would be interested in adopting a child at legal risk. Children at legal risk are children of all ages who are not yet legally free for adoption. Although these children have been separated from their biological parents, they are technically in foster care until the court frees them for adoption. This process can take two years or more to complete. The element of risk in each situation can be fully explained to waiting families by their social worker if they are interested in a legal risk child.

What is happening with your homestudy?

The homestudy is a tool that is utilized by social workers in making matches between families and waiting children. Social workers from across the state network with each other utilizing your homestudy. When your social worker hears of a child or children that she feels would be appropriate for your family, she will give a copy of your homestudy to that child's social worker. Social workers will not tell you every time your homestudy is sent out to prevent the family from experiencing the disappointment if they are not the family chosen for a child. If you are not chosen for a particular child, you should not take it personally. It only means that the family chosen has the specific strengths for that particular child's needs. A child will become available who will match the strengths you have to offer.

If no matching efforts have taken place after a year, you may want to set up a meeting with your social worker. Your social worker will also be contacting you to set up a reassessment meeting. During this meeting, you and your social worker can reassess the situation and the type of child you are interested in adopting.

Be your own Advocate!

Stay in Touch with your Social Worker

Waiting families need to advocate for themselves and stay in touch with their social worker. If your social worker does not hear from you, he/she may worry and wonder whether you are truly involved in the process. The inevitable question then arises as to how often should families be contacting their social worker? The consensus of most social workers is that families should call once a month. Discuss with your social worker what is the best way to stay in touch. Whether it is once a month through email or every other month by phone, your social worker will be able to let you know what is the best way to stay in contact and keep each other up to date. Often a good placement is a matter of good timing. Your social worker can be an excellent resource for you. Just remember to keep in touch and be patient, but persistent.

If you identify a child you are interested in, call their recruitment social worker and let them know who your family resource worker is. Families should also attend DCF and MARE trainings, support groups, and other informational meetings to educate themselves and have the opportunity to talk with other foster/adoptive parents who are waiting. Take the time to network and develop relationships with adoption social workers, family resource workers, and other participants in the process. Advocating for yourself and building relationships is an important part of the adoption process.

Utilize MARE's Services & Resources

Utilize all of MARE's resources and services. Register with MARE. Go to the library and look at the MARE Photolisting® every month. Watch *Wednesday's Child* and read *Sunday's Child*® and other columns in which individual children and sibling groups are featured throughout the state. Attend MARE adoption parties and network with the social workers there. Be sure to bring a one-page summary of your family with a picture and a description of the type of child you are interested in adopting to give to social workers at the event. In this way, the social workers will have something to remember you by after the party. Also, another child might be assigned to that social worker at a later date that might be a great match for your family. By attending both MARE and DCF adoption events, you are opening yourself up to many opportunities.

Get Practice

Baby-sit

Go out and get practice. If you have not had a lot of experience with children, babysitting can be essential in practicing your skills and seeing what parenting is really like. Experience connecting with different children will also help you to clarify for yourself what kind of child you are looking for.

Provide Respite Care

Provide respite care for foster parents. Parenting can be very stressful, and at times, foster parents want a break or need time for rest or a vacation. Respite care is a support service for foster parents, which provides a planned, scheduled period of rest and relief from parental responsibilities. Respite foster parents take over a child's care for a short period of time. Some respite foster parents even volunteer specific times of the year as their schedules permit. As a respite foster parent, you will receive ongoing support from a professional team of social workers as well as reimbursement for providing care. Please social worker for more information about becoming a respite foster parent.

Volunteer to be a Visiting Resource

You can also gain parenting experience and help a child in need by volunteering as a Visiting Resource. Visiting Resource Volunteers commit to spending quality time with a child during the child's stay in a residential or group home setting. Generally, children who have a Visiting Resource have no one else available to visit with them during their stay at a residence. The Visiting Resource program provides children with a support

system and companionship beyond their residence. Please contact your social worker for more information about programs that utilize Visiting Resource Volunteers.

Foster Care

This is a great way for you to gain parenting skills. However, do not do foster care to adopt a child unless you are open to the fact that you may have to transition this child out of your home. Be willing to accept the fact that even if you are interested in adopting your foster child, most children will be reunited with their families.

Assistance for Adoptive Families

There are many resources and supports available to assist families with their decision to adopt.

Adoption Subsidy

Some of the children who are adopted through DCF are considered children with "special needs". Special needs, as defined by the Department of Children and Families includes:

- a child who has one or more special needs as a result of a mental, emotional or physical impairment, behavioral disorder, or medical condition that has been diagnosed by a licensed professional who is qualified to make the diagnosis;
- a child who is a member of a sibling group of 2 to be adopted together and one of the children is 8 years of age or older;
- a child is a member of a sibling group of 3 or more to be adopted together;
- a child is a member of an ethnic or cultural minority of whom reasonable, but unsuccessful efforts to place the child in an adoptive home were made and documented;
- The child's birth and/or family history places the child at risk of having special needs but, due to the child's age, a reliable diagnosis cannot be made.

Adoption subsidies are available to parents who adopt children who have physical or mental disabilities, or severe emotional problems. In addition to those children who qualify for subsidy through the Federal Title IV-E Adoption Assistance program, state subsidies are available to offset the additional costs of caring for a child with special needs. The subsidy programs are intended to remove financial barriers to the adoption of children with special needs, but they are not intended to cover the full cost of raising a child. The amount of the subsidy cannot be greater than the amount that child would have received had the child remained in a family-based foster care setting. The benefits available through the adoption subsidy programs are determined on an individual basis and may include monthly care and maintenance payments (a daily rate), health insurance coverage (Mass Health is intended to supplement the family's insurance and includes medical,

dental and mental health services), or reimbursements for the cost of special services (Parent and Children Together – P.A.C.T.). A quarterly clothing reimbursement may also be available; this is the only reimbursement that is based on the family's annual household income level. All children who are adopted through DCF are eligible to apply for a subsidy, but adoption subsidy is not guaranteed. Both subsidy programs, as administered via the Department of Children and Families, are not based upon the income of the family. The subsidy approval is solely based upon the special need(s) of the child being adopted.

Here are the program guidelines:

- **There must be a signed subsidy agreement in place prior to legalization of the adoption.**
- Eligibility for the subsidy program is not related to the income of the adopting family. The amount of the subsidy is based on the special needs demonstrated by the child and the circumstances of the adopting family.
- A child is eligible for the subsidy until the age of 18. Massachusetts, at the discretion of DCF, will extend the subsidy until age 22 if the child remains in a full-time education program and their permanent address remains the same as the adoptive family's address.
- Re-evaluations are typically required on an annual basis. As part of the re-evaluation, the family may be asked to provide documentation from professionals treating the child.
- The child's adoption worker is required to submit a subsidy application to the DCF Subsidy Unit for every child being adopted through DCF. The family has the right to refuse the subsidy, but the application must be submitted prior to legalization.
- If a child's needs do not support a subsidy benefit at the time of legalization, an agreement may be signed allowing for future benefits (including payments/Mass Health) should the needs change. The family should send documentation from a professional describing the current special needs of the child along with a copy of the signed subsidy agreement to the subsidy unit at DCF.
- All subsidy related questions and concerns should be directed to the subsidy administrator assigned to your region. You can reach a subsidy administrator by calling: 1-800-835-0838, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

State College Tuition Waiver Program

Free undergraduate tuition to many of Massachusetts' state and community colleges and universities is available for children adopted from foster care, if they are admitted. The child must be adopted by a family residing in, or employed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Room, board and other fees are not included in this waiver. Applicants must be full-time students under the age of 25 who are residents of Massachusetts. A FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) must be filed as well. To learn more about the Adoptive Child Tuition Waiver program or to apply, please contact DCF at 617-748-2267.

Adoption Tax Credit

In the summer of 2001, the Federal Adoption Tax Credit was updated. The most important update was to expand benefits to children with special needs adopted from the U.S. foster care system. Originally families adopting from the foster care system could claim the adoption tax credit, provided they had qualifying expenses. Unfortunately, the IRS list of qualifying expenses was limited to the cost of the adoption process, but not the day-to-day costs of raising a child with special needs. However, beginning in tax year 2003, families adopting a child with special needs from foster care, had access to this same tax credit without needing to document expenses. Since tax year 2005, the tax credit is \$10,630 and you have the current year and up to the next five years in which to use it. For families that adopted in 2002 or earlier, you can only claim the credit against expenses you paid related to the adoption process.

If you have questions on the adoption tax credit, contact the North American Council on Adoptable Children at 651-644-3036 or adoption.assistance@nacac.org. You can also visit the IRS website at <http://www.irs.gov/> or call 1-800-829-1040.

Employee Benefits

Employer adoption benefits may include reimbursement for costs, paid or unpaid time-off and other support services. For more information contact the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption at 1-877-777-4222 or info@adoptionfriendlyworkplace.org or visit their website at www.adoptionfriendlyworkplace.org. You can also talk to your employer.

Pre & Post Adoption Resources

POST ADOPTION SERVICES

[Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children \(MSPCC\)/ Kid's Net](#)

is a private, nonprofit society with a legacy of strengthening families and preventing child abuse through essential child welfare and mental health treatment and effective public advocacy. Through the Kid's Net Program, under contract with the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, MSPCC gives support to foster, adoptive and kinship parents who care for children in DCF custody.

[Adoptive Families Together \(AFT\)](#), a program of MSPCC, is a network of adoptive families founded in Massachusetts by parents who understood the benefit of peer support while raising families with complex issues. Their parent support meetings, held in the New England area, provide post-adoptive information, education and support for people touched by adoption. Contact AFT for support group locations.

[Adoption Community of New England, Inc. \(ACONE\)](#) offers events and programs throughout the year for all those touched by adoption, including the Annual New England Adoption Conference (the largest, single-day conference of its kind), a library of adoption-

related audio, video and print materials and a directory of therapy providers. Contact ACONE for chapter locations throughout MA and New England.

[Center for Family Connections](#) is an agency whose goal is to serve individuals and families touched by adoption, foster care, kinship, guardianship, as well as other complex blended families, and to serve the people with whom they are connected, by offering clinical treatment, consultation, training, education, and advocacy.

[Single Parents for the Adoption of Children Everywhere \(SPACE\)](#), a chapter of ACONE, began in 1974 and is a support and information organization for single adoptive parents, singles interested in adoption, and the children of families formed through single parent adoption.

Massachusetts Department of Children and Families

- **Subsidy Unit:** Contact the Subsidy Unit and/or your Subsidy Administrator regarding any subsidy related concerns at 1-800-835-0838.
- **Search Unit:** Please contact the Search Unit at 617-748-2240 (if the adoption was done through a private agency and that agency is known, you can contact the agency directly).
- **Tuition Waiver Program:** Free undergraduate tuition to most of Massachusetts' state and community colleges and universities is available for children adopted from foster care, if they are admitted. The child must be adopted by a family residing in, or employed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Room, board and other fees are not included in this waiver. Applicants must be full-time students under the age of 25 who are residents of Massachusetts. A FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) must be filed as well. To learn more about the Adoptive Child Tuition Waiver program or to apply, please contact DCF at 617-748-2267.

Adoption Journeys provides post adoption support services to families throughout Massachusetts. All adoptive families in the Commonwealth are eligible to receive Adoption Journeys services, which include support groups for parents and children, adoption counseling, respite services, parent liaisons, adoption competency training and regional intensive crisis response teams. To find the agency that serves your area, please contact the lead agency, Child and Family Services, Inc. at 1-800-972-2734.

[Adoption Connection](#) is one of the oldest search and support organizations for adoptees, birth parents, siblings, adoptive families and anyone who has been separated through adoption. Searches are done with strict confidentiality along with respect and responsibility for all who are involved. The entire staff, led by founder and director Susan Darke, has had a personal experience with adoption, which makes them committed and sensitive to guide and advise on how to make contact along with working through the issues of search and reunion.

MASSACHUSETTS ORGANIZATIONS

[The Center for Adoption Research at UMASS](#) is dedicated to assisting families and professionals by providing independent research, evaluation and education to improve the lives of children in adoptive and foster families.

[The Massachusetts Department of Children and Families \(DCF\)](#) is the state child welfare and protection agency. The Department is dedicated to the safety, permanency and well being of children who have been abused and neglected in family settings, or by recognized caretakers. In delivering services to children and families, the Department seeks first to ensure the safety of children. *Please [click here](#) to review the Department of Children and Families' Standards for Agency Foster/Pre-Adoptive Parents and the Agreement Between the Department of Children and Families and Foster/Pre-Adoptive Parents.*

[Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children \(ICPC\)](#) outlines the process that states have follow to ensure consistent protection and services to children who are placed across state lines. The Massachusetts ICPC office is housed at the Department of Children and Families Central Office. They can be reached at:
Department of Children and Families
Attention: Interstate Compact Unit
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210
Local: 617.748.2000
Toll Free: 1.800.548.4802

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

[Adopt America Network \(AAN\)](#) works to find permanent, loving, adoptive homes for waiting children throughout the U.S. AAN's goal is that no child shall have to wait for adoption regardless of his/her circumstances. Adopt America Network matches only children with special needs, and their network includes field representatives throughout the country.

[The Adoption Exchange Association \(AEA\)](#) connects representatives of state, regional and national adoption exchanges, placement agencies, parents, child welfare professionals and concerned citizens across the United States. The AEA provides a forum that promotes the exchange of ideas and strategies, collaboration on issues of mutual interest, and increased effectiveness in utilizing resources to provide waiting children permanent homes. The Adoption Exchange Association also administers the AdoptUsKids Initiative, which includes a national on-line photolisting of waiting children, parent support groups, a national recruitment campaign, and training and technical assistance.

[The American Adoption Congress \(AAC\)](#) is an international network of individuals and organizations committed to truth in adoption and to reform that protects all of those involved from abuse or exploitation. Membership is open to adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, professionals and all others who share a commitment to the AAC's goals.

[The Child Welfare Information Gateway](#), formerly the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information and the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, Child Welfare Information Gateway, provides access to information and resources to help protect children and strengthen families. A service of the [Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.](#)

[The Child Welfare League of America \(CWLA\)](#) is the oldest and largest national nonprofit organization developing and promoting policies and programs to protect

America's children and strengthen American families. CWLA's 1,000 plus public and private nonprofit member agencies serve 3 million abused and neglected children and their families each year.

Children Awaiting Parents (CAP) is a national non-profit organization that recruits foster and adoptive families for special needs children who have been waiting the longest for a "forever" family. CAP publishes the only printed national photolisting of special needs children and also administers a Web site, which includes photos and narratives of waiting children.

The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids is a project of The Children's Bureau, part of the Federal Department of Health and Human Services. In October 2002, The Children's Bureau contracted with The Adoption Exchange Association and its partners (The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids) to devise and implement a national adoptive family recruitment and retention strategy, operate the AdoptUsKids.org website, encourage and enhance adoptive family support organizations and conduct a variety of adoption research projects.

The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption serves as an active voice for the more than 150,000 children in North America's public child welfare system who are waiting for permanent homes and loving families. The Foundation has simplified its vision into one statement, "Every child will have a permanent home and a loving family." By funding various national initiatives that directly impact waiting children and expanding the public's awareness of adoption, the Foundation is focused on making a difference in the lives of waiting children.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute founded in 1996, is a national not-for-profit organization devoted to improving adoption policy and practice. Their mission is to improve the quality of information about adoption, enhance the understanding and perception of adoption and advance adoption policy and practice. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute pursues this mission with a concern for all participants in adoption: birth families, adoptive parents, adopted persons and adoption professionals.

Global Connections for U.S. Citizens Living Abroad is a collaborative effort of VIDA (Voice of International Development and Adoption) and The Adoption Exchange of Denver, Colorado to promote the adoption of U.S. waiting children by U.S. citizens living abroad. Both military and non-military families are invited to consider this program. For more information about VIDA and The Adoption Exchange's Global Connections program contact The Adoption Exchange by phone 303-333-0845 or [e-mail](#) Global Connections.

The National Child Welfare Resource Center for Adoption assists states, tribes and other federally funded child welfare agencies in building their capacity to ensure the safety, well being and permanency of abused and neglected children through adoption and post legal adoption services program planning, policy development and practice. The Center provides technical assistance, consultation, training, information and referral, and resource materials to assist states and tribes in improving their adoption and adoption support and preservation services.

The North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) was founded in 1974 by adoptive parents and is committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them. Since its inception, NACAC's mission has remained essentially

unchanged: Every child has the right to a permanent family. The Council advocates the right of every child to a permanent, continuous, nurturing and culturally sensitive family. **Voice for Adoption (VFA)** speaks out to insure permanent, nurturing families for our nation's most vulnerable children and to strengthen support for families who adopt. Voice for Adoption is a national coalition that has been established to actively encourage and advocate for national policies that address barriers to the adoption of waiting children and increase the understanding among the public, the media, and decision-makers of the needs of these children and the families who adopt. They can be reached at 703-430-7600 or by [e-mail](#).

LITERATURE

[Adopting on Your Own: The Complete Guide to Adopting as a Single Parent](#), written by Lee Varon, is a guide for decision-making. It addresses the questions and concerns of the growing number of prospective single parents. The book covers all stages of the adoption process, from deciding whether it's right for you, to orchestrating the adoption itself, to raising an adopted child as a single parent.

[Adopting the Older Child](#), written by Claudia Jewett, is a classic that has withstood the test of time. This book describes the children who are waiting and the adoption process, and gives vignettes of children's issues as they move into adoption.

[Adoption is](#), . . . written by D. A. Royster, tells the story of one boy's adoption. This book makes it easy for parents, children, and teachers to talk about adoption. This illustrated children's book will touch the hearts of parents, educators and children as they gain a clear understanding of one family's adoption process.

[Adoption Nation](#), written by Adam Pertman, an award-winning journalist and adoptive father, provides valuable insights into the pleasures and perils of adoption and how it affects almost all of our lives, whether we realize it or not. Pertman also lays out the ways in which policymakers should revise laws to improve the process of adoption, stop treating members of the adoption triad as second-class citizens, and remove the obstacles that keep the children who most need permanent homes from getting them.

[Adoption-Works](#) offers a priceless "gift" for the adopted child - a personalized adoption LifeBook. A LifeBook is a record of an adoptee's or foster child's life that uses words, photos, the child's artwork and memorabilia to promote trust and attachment. Through author Beth O'Malley's Web site, you can purchase *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* and *For When I'm Famous: A Teen Foster/Adoption Lifebook* as well as guides to help you create LifeBooks with your children. Formats are specific to children who have spent time in foster care and children who have been adopted (suitable for adoptions from foster care, domestic infant adoptions and international adoptions).

[Adoptive Families](#) is an award-winning national adoption magazine and an adoption information source for families before, during, and after adoption.

[EMK](#) Press is a publisher of adoption themed materials for Infants to Young Adults from the perspective of the child. They also believe that information is power and have developed a series of useful guides to help parents on the journey of raising an adoptive family. These are wonderfully informative guides that will help families navigate the journey of adoption parenting. They are free to download.

[Fostering Families TODAY and Adoption TODAY](#) are magazines about you: the parents, children and dedicated professionals of foster care and domestic adoption.

[Parents Wanted](#) is a novel by adoptive father George Harrar that portrays the challenges and rewards of adoption through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy who has been in multiple foster homes. It is the humorous and thoughtful story of Andy, who desperately needs and wants a loving home yet who struggles with his past and the emotions evoked by his new life.

[Perspective Press](#) has been, since 1982, providing award-winning books, articles, and workshops for consumers and for medical, mental health, counseling and allied professionals on infertility, reproductive health and alternative family building.

[Tapestry Books](#) is the largest company specializing in adoption, infertility and parenting challenges books. Their on-line catalog lists over 300 books and can be browsed by topic, title or author. Their catalog includes books written for both adults and children.

THANK YOU!

Thank you for taking the time to read MARE's booklet for waiting families. We hope that you now have a better understanding of what you can do while you are waiting to expand your family. Adopting through foster care usually takes an average of one to two years. Therefore, MARE attempts to make the waiting process as easy and painless as possible by hosting adoption events throughout the year, providing continuous services, and providing referrals to organizations and resources that can assist you throughout the process. Waiting families should not hesitate to take advantage of all of the services and resources that are available to them.

We recommend you keep this booklet as a resource throughout your adoption process. If you have any further questions or wish to request any of the services MARE provides, please feel free to contact us at 1-800-882-1176 or 617-54-ADOPT (617-542-3678). We have staff available Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., to answer calls. Congratulations on your decision to adopt a child. We at MARE wish you the best in helping a child find a "place to call HOME".

MARE would like to thank Anne Bowie, Jaime Caron, Stephanie Frankel, Ted Blake and Jim Burns for their contributions to this booklet.

Contact Information

website: www.mareinc.org

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45 Franklin Street, 5th Floor
 Boston, MA 02110
 617-54-ADOPT (617-542-3678)
 1-800-882-1176
 Fax: 617-542-1006
 TTY: 617-542-7772

MARE Western MA Office

c/o Department of Children and Families
 140 High Street, 5th Floor
 Springfield, MA 01105
 413-452-3431 or 413-452-3365

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