



Be a foster or adoptive **parent**
and **change a life.**





#MeetTheKids offers potential foster and adoptive parents the opportunity to peek into the hearts and minds of older youth waiting for homes.

The **#MeetTheKids** campaign features 12 real kids from Pennsylvania that are waiting for adoption – waiting for someone like you to show them what a real family is.

These special kids were given iPods and a little direction and were asked to help film each other and share why they want a family and what having a family would mean to them.

The images you see throughout this brochure are actual images from our **#MeetTheKids** production and feature the children who participated in the making of the **#MeetTheKids** documentary.

To view the full documentary, visit adoptpakids.org.

**BE A FOSTER
OR ADOPTIVE
PARENT.**

**1.800.585.SWAN
www.adoptpakids.org**

If you are considering becoming a foster or adoptive parent, you probably have a lot of questions. This booklet has been designed to help you understand the similarities and differences in foster care and adoption, but it may not provide answers to all of your questions. If you would like more information on foster care and adoption, please call the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) Helpline at 1.800.585.SWAN (7926) to speak to someone who can help you explore your options, or visit www.adoptpakids.org.

OPTION ONE: BE A FOSTER PARENT

Loving families, just like yours, are key to the success of the child welfare system. Right now there are approximately 14,000 children in temporary foster care in Pennsylvania. As a foster parent, you will have the unique opportunity to touch the lives of children in a significant and lasting way.

GETTING STARTED...

To ensure the child's safety, the agency will conduct a criminal background check and child abuse clearance on everyone in your home, age 14 and over. While foster families do not need to be well-off financially, the home approval process will require an in-depth evaluation of your total family picture and history, including financial stability. The physical features of your home will also be evaluated to ensure that there is adequate space for a child and that all safety requirements are met.

It takes a special type of person to provide stability to children in crisis when their own home has stopped being the right place for them to live, at least for the time being. But that doesn't mean they've stopped needing what all kids need: security, nurturing and guidance. Foster parents step in and provide those protections temporarily.

LETTING GO...

Most children are in foster care for a short time, with the majority of children returning to their family of origin. A foster home can be an important haven, keeping children safe, helping them cope with their grief and loss and helping to prepare them for the eventual return to their family. Because of these challenges, foster parenting requires special people—people who can take children quickly and without hesitation into their homes knowing that, when the time comes, they will need to lovingly let them go.

Although most foster children are returned to their biological family, if such a return is not in the best interest of the child, the court may order that the parents' rights be terminated and the child be placed for adoption. Should that happen, foster parents should play a key role in a child's transition to an adoptive family, or they may consider adopting the child into their own home. Depending on how long a child has been in foster

care, the foster parent may know the most about a child. Foster parents should know they will be looked to for the valuable input they have about a child. Adoptive parents should not feel threatened by the bond and love shared between the foster parents and the child who will soon be their own. While foster parents have been an important part of this child's life, that attachment will not take away from the love the child can develop for their adoptive parents. By bonding with their foster families, the child will be better prepared for life's ups and downs because they were loved and cared for by everyone involved in their care.

If a foster family decides they would like to adopt their foster child, an adoptive family profile, or home study, will be done. Your family will have the opportunity to receive training, coaching and interviewing about the lifelong commitment to adoption—as opposed to the temporary nature of foster care. And even though you have been foster parents to your child and had previous foster home studies done, the same legal requirements will apply to you as they would to any adoptive parent.

OPTION TWO: BE AN ADOPTIVE PARENT

There are two sides to the adoption process: preparing the child legally and emotionally for adoption and preparing the prospective family. Both involve a lot of evaluation, paperwork, and decision-making by judges, agencies, parents, and of course, the children themselves. It is SWAN's mission to help both sides of the adoption process work together quickly and smoothly.

THE CHILDREN

A child might be voluntarily placed into the system by parents who are having difficulty caring for their children. Or children might be taken out of their homes by a court order. Ultimately each of these children will do one or more of the following:

- Return to their families when the problems are resolved*
- Be placed with a fit and willing relative*
- Be placed with a permanent legal custodian*
- Be placed in a planned permanent living arrangement*
- Be adopted by someone like you*

After the child is placed into the system, the county agency must first work with the child's family to resolve the issues that led to placement. If a timely resolution is not possible, the agency can recommend that a child be considered for adoption. A judge will then hold a hearing to decide if adoption is the best course of action for the welfare of the child.

But even before a child can be considered available for adoption, parental rights must be terminated, meaning that the legal relationship between the biological parent(s)



and child is ended. Termination can be done voluntarily (if both biological parents agree) or involuntarily when the agency is able to prove parental abuse, neglect, or incapacity that cannot or will not be remedied.

If parental rights have been terminated and no adoptive family is identified, the child is registered with the Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange. Currently in Pennsylvania, more than 2,500 children are waiting to be adopted.

THE PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Some prospective adoptive parents already know the child they want to adopt—especially in the case of foster parents hoping to adopt their foster children or relatives of children available for adoption. Other parents do not have a particular child in mind and need more information before they can get started. But it is fair to say that all adoptive parents enter the process with different expectations and levels of knowledge.

Parents who wish to adopt an infant will generally seek the services of a private adoption agency, while parents interested in adopting a child with special needs or an older child will most likely be working with a county agency or a SWAN affiliate agency.

THE APPLICATION

All prospective parents need to fill out an application and undergo an initial screening. You will need to supply a doctor's statement certifying that you are basically healthy, provide some financial records, and undergo a criminal background check and child abuse clearance to ensure the child's safety. If you or any member of your household has been named as a perpetrator of a founded child abuse report, or convicted of a drug- or alcohol-related felony within the previous five years, or ever convicted of any one of a specific list of sexual or violent crimes, your application will not be considered. Personal references will also be required.

THE FAMILY PROFILE (HOME STUDY)

After the initial screening, parents must complete an adoptive family profile, also called a home study. The home study is a series of meetings between you and an agency worker to determine if your home would be a safe, caring place to raise an adoptive child, as well as to help prepare you for the adoption. The format of these meetings depends on the agency; some conduct individual interviews with parents, others hold group sessions with several families.





These meetings are meant to provide you with an opportunity to ask questions and get answers. Some of the questions that may be addressed include: What will the costs be? Can the agency help identify financial aid for the child? What are some of the daily challenges of raising a child with special needs? Are there post-adoption services available? Does the agency sponsor peer support groups or provide access to parents in adoption situations that are similar to mine? Where will the child sleep? If all of the adults in the household work, who will look after the child?

During most study periods, it is required that one of these meetings is held in your home. The thought of a home visit intimidates many prospective parents. It shouldn't. Agency workers are interested in bringing families together.

The social worker will want to know about things like your life experiences, reasons for wanting to adopt, what kind of child you want to adopt and your previous experience with children. If you are a married couple, the worker will want to know the stability of the marriage, how you handle everyday pressures and disagreements and how each of you feels about adopting. If you are single or divorced, you might be asked if there is any family member who can baby-sit or help out in case you are sick.

THE FINAL STEPS

Once the family profile is completed, the agency will begin to let you know about waiting children who might be a good match. The social worker will give you all the child's available information: family background, including what events led to the child being removed from his or her family, or anything that might affect the child's health, intellectual ability or ability to bond with a new family. You'll get a chance to meet the child and spend time together before making any decisions. If you and the child both feel comfortable, the county agency with custody of the child can then arrange to bring the child into your home.

Once a child is placed with you for adoption, you will need to have your lawyer file a "Report of Intent To Adopt." Before the adoption can be finalized, there is a period of supervision and support for the child and the new family. Usually this period lasts about three to six months; however, the child must be in the home for a six-month period prior to finalization. Foster parents who have already had the child placed with them may be able to have the adoption finalized sooner.





FIVE THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

1. YOU'RE MORE QUALIFIED THAN YOU THINK.

Years ago, adoptive parents were typically childless, young Caucasian couples seeking infants. Today's adoptive parents are as diverse as the children who are waiting for them. The primary requirement for adoption is the ability to make a permanent commitment to provide love and security to a child. Nowadays, most people who adopt are between the ages of 25 and 50, but people much older can qualify too.

You don't have to be "well off" financially to adopt. You don't have to own your own home or have a separate bedroom for each child. You can adopt as a single parent, unless a particular child has needs that require a two-parent family. But you will need to be able to meet the child's basic needs in your home, and your personal health is important. Keeping up with the demands of children requires lots of energy. It definitely helps to have a supportive network of friends and family!

In short, agencies are not looking for perfect people. They are looking for loving, secure people with the flexibility and maturity to take on the commitment of caring for another human being.

2. YOU MAY BE THE RIGHT FAMILY FOR A KID WHO NEEDS A HOME.

Matching a waiting child with a suitable family requires that a family take a good look at its own resources, limits and desires in adopting. Some prospective parents enter the process knowing they want to adopt a healthy infant. Others have decided that they want to offer a home to an older child or a child with special needs. Some are new to adoption and want to learn more before reaching a decision.

In the world of adoption, "special needs" refers to a broad category of children. Their one common need is for a permanent home with loving parents. Many of these children have physical or emotional problems, and they need someone to help them turn their lives around. Some of their problems can be easily resolved; others cannot.

A child with special needs may have developmental disabilities or a high IQ. He or she may be open and affectionate or shy and withdrawn. Some children have been moved around in the system, so they have not been able to thrive. However, a child with special needs may also mean a child who is over the age of five. Older boys make up a majority of waiting children.

Many waiting children are African-American. For these children, there is a great need for minority families or Caucasian families who display a willingness to help the child grow up with an appreciation for his or her ethnic heritage.

Some children are defined as "special needs" because they are part of a group of two or more brothers or sisters. These children need families who, if they cannot adopt them as a group, are willing to help siblings maintain contact with each other. Keeping siblings together as a family is a top priority.

Watching your child reach a fuller potential because of the love and support found in your family is a uniquely rewarding experience. Families caring for children with special needs usually have loads of extra patience and take joy in small day-to-day victories. Special needs adoption is not right for everyone, but the right combination of child and parent can result in a lifetime of love.

3. ADOPTION IS NOT NECESSARILY EXPENSIVE.

Adoption fees can vary greatly. Depending on your income and whether or not you are adopting a child with special needs, your home study and legal costs may be free or reimbursable. The age or other circumstances of the child are also factors in determining the adoption assistance that may be available for the child.

4. THERE ARE POST-ADOPTION SERVICES AND SUBSIDIES TO HELP YOU.

Adopting a child is an enormous personal commitment that is guaranteed to provide unexpected challenges. That is why SWAN's commitment to adoptive families does not end with the adoption. SWAN can help you locate parent groups for peer support, counseling, or other services—as much or as little as you feel you need.

Many people who adopt a child with special needs are able to get financial help to cover extra costs, medical and otherwise. Adoption assistance may include medical assistance coverage for medical care or other special services. Depending on the child's circumstances, families can receive a monthly payment to help cover the costs of raising a child with special needs or a payment to help out with initial adoption costs, such as travel for pre-adoptive visits, home study fees and legal expenses. The child's need for ongoing social services may also be addressed.

5. THE PROCESS OF ADOPTING A CHILD THROUGH SWAN HAS MANY PHASES.

The paperwork and legal steps involved in adoption can cause some delays. For a parent waiting for a child, especially a child he or she has met and knows, these delays can be frustrating and anxiety-producing. Try to keep in mind that the adoption process takes time, especially in the case of a child with special needs. Part of SWAN's mission is to clarify and expedite the process so that everyone involved knows what is reasonable to expect and when.



PENNSYLVANIA'S WAITING CHILDREN

Right now, there are approximately 14,000 children in custody of the county children and youth system, 2,500 of whom will be adopted. Approximately 1,000 children still need a family to be identified for them. The children being adopted today are more likely than ever before to be older children who wait, sometimes for years, for a permanent home. More than half of these children are of a minority race, and there are more boys in the system than girls. Many of these children have physical or emotional problems due to circumstances beyond their control, and they need someone to help them turn their lives around. Some of their problems can be easily resolved; others cannot.

Here are some questions to ask yourself if you are considering adopting a waiting child:

- *Why do you want to adopt?*
- *What are your expectations?*
- *Have you ever helped to raise a child?*
- *What types of activities do you enjoy with children?*
- *How do you feel about "open" adoption, in which the adopted child maintains contact with his or her birth family?*
- *Would you be willing to support and facilitate continued contact with your child's siblings or other relatives?*
- *How do you feel about adopting children of another race?*
- *If you adopted a child of another race, would you be willing to help the child grow up with an appreciation for his or her ethnic heritage?*
- *How patient are you?*
- *How well do you handle stress?*
- *How well do you relate to young children?*
- *Are you able to communicate with children in a way they can understand?*
- *Have you ever spent time around teenagers?*
- *Do you have any experience in dealing with teen issues (like peer pressure, alcohol, drugs, sex)?*
- *Have you ever spent time with someone who has a disability?*

Adopting a child with special needs is a demanding job with few guarantees, but many rewards. These children need families who will acknowledge their personal issues, value them as unique instead of perfect, and help them rebuild their lives. They need love, stability and a chance to thrive.



ADOPTION ASSISTANCE

WHAT IS ADOPTION ASSISTANCE?

Adoption Assistance is a program that provides financial help, Medicaid and other benefits to families who adopt eligible children with special needs. This program was developed out of a growing awareness that children with special needs require continued support. These families need some assistance to take on the extra costs associated with adopting and raising children with special needs.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR ASSISTANCE?

The decision about the type and the amount of assistance to be provided for a particular child is made by the county that has legal custody of the child, in consultation with the adoptive family. Eligibility for Adoption Assistance is based on the needs and status of the child, not the adoptive family.

In order to qualify for Adoption Assistance in Pennsylvania, a child must meet the following requirements:

- *The child is under 18 years of age*
- *The parental rights have been terminated*
- *The child is in the legal custody of a county children and youth agency or another agency licensed by the state*

In addition, the child must have at least one of the following characteristics:

- *A physical, mental or emotional disability*
- *A genetic condition that indicates a high risk of developing a disease or handicap*
- *Be a member of a minority group*
- *Be a member of a sibling group placed together*
- *Be five years of age or older*

WHAT TYPES OF BENEFITS ARE AVAILABLE?

Benefits may include one or more of the following types of assistance:

- *Medicaid Cards issued in the name of the adopted child.*
- *Reimbursement of Nonrecurring Adoption Expenses. Reasonable and necessary costs sometimes paid by families can include court costs, attorney fees and travel costs for visiting with a waiting child. These expenses—which are directly related to the legal adoption of a child with special needs—may be reimbursed up to \$2,000 per child.*
- *Maintenance Payments are monthly cash payments intended to help defray the costs of providing food, shelter, clothing and other incidental expenses associated with raising a child. These payments may not exceed the amount the county would have paid if the child had remained in foster care. Maintenance Payments may continue until a child reaches the age of 21 provided they are adopted at age 13 or older.*

BRINGING RESOURCES TOGETHER

A generation of research has shown that children who move to adoption in a timely manner are more successful economically, socially and emotionally. They're more likely to be successful parents and productive citizens.

If you're looking to adopt a child in the county children and youth system, the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) can help. SWAN facilitates the process of adoption for children in county custody for everyone involved so that the shared goal of getting children adopted from foster care can take place as quickly and successfully as possible.

INFORMATION AND FACILITATION

SWAN is both a broad-based cooperative effort and a centralized information/facilitation service that is funded and overseen by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. SWAN includes county children and youth agencies, juvenile court judges, foster and adoptive parents, private adoption agencies and many others, all working together on behalf of children who need permanent homes. If you would like more information on foster care and adoption, please call the SWAN Helpline at 1.800.585.SWAN (7926) or visit www.adoptpakids.org.





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pennsylvania
STATEWIDE ADOPTION AND
PERMANENCY NETWORK

Tom Corbett, Governor | Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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