

Chapter 18 - Adoption

18.1 Overview

When a child cannot be safely reunited with his or her birth family, adoption is generally seen as the next most permanent option, because it gives the child a permanent, legal family with the same legal standing and protection as a family created through birth. Through adoption, all parental rights and responsibilities are legally and permanently transferred to the adoptive parent. In cases where successful, safe reunification is not an option, adoption is the best possible alternative for many children, providing a sense of belonging and security that cannot be found in other “temporary living arrangements.”

“When children can’t be reunified with their birth parents, adoption is a wonderful alternative to help kids connect with a family. I found a woman to call my mom and I know she will love me forever. I hope all children in foster care have the same chance.”

- J.W., 20, Former Pennsylvania Foster Youth

The adoption hearing is typically the final step in the process of securing a permanent family for the dependent child. It is a time of happiness for both the child and the adoptive family. With all the needed legal requirements completed and service supports in place, the adoption hearing is an opportunity for celebration. This is a special day for everyone involved and should be so recognized. The Judge presiding over the hearing has an opportunity to assist in the celebration by accommodating the unique wishes and desires of the child and family.

Best Practice — Adoption Celebrations

Many counties throughout the Commonwealth take extraordinary steps to make the day of adoption a very special one for children and their adoptive families. Celebrations range from formal “Adoption Days,” where numerous adoptions are finalized on the same day with accompanying celebration activities, to more simple practices that encourage adopting families to design their own adoption experiences, often including extended family members and friends.

Whatever the process, the Judge is in a unique position to recognize the importance of the day and support each family’s desire for making the day a special one. Pictures and video recordings are encouraged and can help memorialize the day. In many courts, adoptees are encouraged to come to the Judge’s bench and bang the gavel to end the ceremony and “symbolically” begin life in the adoptive family. Other courts provide small tokens to adoptees, such as stuffed animals or books, to help them remember the occasion.

18.2 Jurisdiction

Adoption in Pennsylvania is generally governed by the Adoption Act, 23 Pa.C.S. § 2101 *et seq.* Other laws that may bear on adoptions involving dependent children (described more fully in Chapter 20: Summary of Major Federal and State Child Welfare Legislation) include the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children, 62 P.S. § 761, *et seq.*; the Adoption Opportunities Act, 62 P.S. § 771-74 (relating to placement of special needs children); and various federal laws, including the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, and the Fostering Connections Act of 2008. In addition, various Department of Public Welfare regulations may impact the adoption process.

Under 23 Pa.C.S. § 2302, adoption proceedings may be brought in the court of any of the following counties:

- Where the parent, the adoptee, or the person filing the report/notice of intention to adopt resides;
- Where the agency having custody of the adoptee is located;
- Where the agency that placed the adoptee is located; or
- With leave of the court, where the adoptee formerly resided.

As is discussed more fully in Chapter 3: Jurisdiction, under 20 Pa.C.S. § 711, only judges with Orphans' Court authority are permitted to preside over adoption hearings. (The only exception is for Philadelphia, where 20 Pa.C.S. § 713 entrusts these matters to the Family Court Division.) However, in those judicial districts in which the jurisdiction of the Dependency Court and the Orphans' Court are separated by statute (see list in Chapter 3, footnote 1), the Judge who hears the dependency matter may be permitted to have the authority of an Orphans' Court Judge for the purpose of concluding the adoption through a local order of the President Judge (42 Pa.C.S. §6351(i)).

Best Practice—One Judge/One Family

As in earlier stages of the dependency process, the “One Judge – One Family” is pertinent to the adoption phase. When possible, having the Judge who initiated the dependency matter preside over the adoption finalization may help add consistency and closure for the child and the family (PA Children’s Roundtable Initiative, 2009, p. 14).

18.3 Pre-Adoption Requirements

The court has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that all required pre-hearing steps are completed. These include:

- 1. Pre-adoptive Home Study & Pre-Placement Report.** This report on the prospective adoptive parent must have been completed within three years prior to placement of the adoptee in the home and updated within one year prior to placement of the adoptee. The pre-placement report must include information regarding the fitness of the adoptive parents and the home environment (See 23 Pa.C.S. § 2530 for specific elements required in the report).
- 2. Report of Intention to Adopt (also known as Notice of Intention to Adopt).** This report/notice must be filed by the person who has custody of an adoptee with the court in which the petition for adoption will be filed. This report must include specific information regarding the person having custody of the child, the child, and the intermediary (23 Pa.C.S. § 2531). It is often filed simultaneously with the termination of parental rights petition but can be filed later if a permanent resource family has yet to be identified for the child. The report/notice must be filed within 30 days of receiving physical care of the adoptee (23 Pa.C.S. § 2532).
- 3. Report of the Intermediary.** Within 6 months after filing the Report of Intention to Adopt, the intermediary that arranged the adoption placement must make a written report to the court where the adoption will be filed and notify the adopting parents that the report has been filed. (In dependency cases, the intermediary is the county child welfare agency.) The report must contain specific information regarding the intermediary, the child, and the prospective adoptive parents (23 Pa.C.S. § 2533 (b)). Required attachments include the child's birth certificate, any consent necessary for adoption, and a certified decree of the termination of parental rights if the adoption is occurring in any county other than the county in which the termination occurred.
- 4. Adoption Subsidy Agreement.** Adoption Assistance supports permanency for special needs children by providing the families who adopt these children with resources to assist in the care for these children. The adoption subsidy agreement is the binding agreement that is negotiated between the adopting parent(s) and the public county children and youth agency when the public county children and youth agency has determined a child eligible for adoption assistance. It articulates ongoing financial and programmatic supports for an eligible adoptee, including reimbursement for allowable one-time expenses related to the adoption process, a monthly subsidy and medicaid or medical

assistance coverage. Any agreed-upon monthly subsidy amount cannot exceed the amount that would have been provided had the eligible adoptee remained in foster care. The agreement must be signed and in effect prior to or at the time of the final decree of adoption and terminates upon the eligible child's eighteenth birthday or age twenty-one if the adoption agreement became effective when the child was at least 13 years of age and this agreement was in effect on or after July 1, 2012.

Best Practice—Adoption Subsidies and Services

In most counties, creation of the Adoption Subsidy Agreement is the responsibility of the child welfare agency, subject to the approval of the County Board of Commissioners, and does not involve the court. However, it is certainly in the adoptee's best interest for the court to ensure that the child's ongoing needs have been addressed prior to concluding the court's oversight. The Judge should make sure adoptive parents are aware of services and financial resources available prior to the finalization of the adoption, including the availability of post-adoption services should such be needed. The Judge should also work with agency administration to ensure a local process that accommodates the timely completion of Adoption Subsidy Agreements without slowing the legal adoption process.

18.4 Adoption Hearings

18.4.1 Preliminary Matters

The Petition for Adoption is the final pleading and is filed after parental rights have been terminated. The petition must include information and exhibits as delineated in 23 Pa.C.S. § 2701-2.

The consent of a child of 12 or older is required for an adoption under 23 Pa.C.S. § 2711.

Notice of the adoption hearing, by personal service or registered mail, must be given to the child, the agency and any other persons the court directs (23 Pa.C.S. § 2721).

There is no requirement that counsel be appointed or that counsel be present for the adoption hearing. Adoptive parents are generally represented by privately retained counsel, an allowable adoption reimbursement expense.

18.4.2 Attendance at Hearing

The adopting parent or parents and the adoptee must attend the hearing. In addition, the child welfare agency generally attends the hearing. The court may require testimony of anyone present.

Best Practice — Attendance at Adoption Hearings

Many courts encourage adoptive parents to invite a wide range of “guests” to witness the adoption, including extended family members, church congregations, school friends, work associates, and others. Courts often encourage former caseworkers for the child/family, GALs and CASA to attend the hearing as well.

Where possible, guests may be allowed to participate through direct testimony or by reading poetry, providing prayers, singing, decorating the courtroom, taking pictures/videos, or simply sharing hopes for the future of the adoptee and the new family. Activities that reflect the adoptee’s and adoptive family’s values, traditions and beliefs should be encouraged.

18.4.3 Testimony and Investigation

While the adoption hearing can be and often is relatively short, its importance in the lives of children and their new families cannot be understated. The Judge’s job is to ensure that the event is both memorable and legally sound. A set of questions which may assist judges are found at the end of this chapter. While not exhaustive, the list provides possible questions aimed at eliciting needed information.

Best Practice—Conduct of Adoption Hearings

The Adoption Petition provides the court with significant written information about the child and adoptive parents. By reviewing this information prior to the hearing, the Judge can glean pertinent information and craft questions that solicit the needed information to meet legal requirements, solidify family relationships, and ease the child/family’s concern about this final hearing.

Some judges encourage the adopted children to sit with the adoptive mother or father on the witness stand or join the Judge on the bench, asking just a few short questions as a means of helping the child feel included in the proceedings.

Prior to the conclusion of the hearing, the Judge should ensure evidence and testimony have been provided to sufficiently answer the following questions:

1. Have all legal requirements been met?
2. Why is the adoption in the best interest of the child?
3. What is the child's current adjustment in the home, school, and community?
4. Do the adopting parent(s) understand the rights and responsibilities of this newly created parent-child relationship—including the permanency and obligations of adoption?
5. Has there been full disclosure regarding the child's medical and psychological background?
6. If over the age of 12 years, does the child consent to the adoption?
7. Has the adopting family signed the adoption assistance agreement and are there any questions regarding the agreement?
8. Are all necessary services and supports in place?
9. Is the new family aware of available services and support to meet the adoptee's current and future needs, and do they know who to contact if they need assistance in the future?
10. Whether a Voluntary Agreement for Continuing Contact filed with the court should be approved per 23 Pa.C.S. § 2735?

18.5 Adoption Orders

Once the court is satisfied that the statements made in the petition are true, that the needs and welfare of the adoptee will be promoted by the adoption and that all legal requirements have been met, the court must enter a decree so finding and directing that the adoptee shall have all the rights of a child to and heir of the adoptive parents and be subject to the duties of a child to them (23 Pa.C.S. § 2902). While the court enters its decree, it is not distributed to any party (see 23 Pa.C.S. § 2905). Instead, the adoptive parents receive a Certificate of Adoption.

The Certificate of Adoption reciting that the court has granted the adoption is issued by the clerk to the adoptive parent or parents. The certificate cannot disclose the name of any natural parent or the original name of the adoptee. The certificate must be accepted in any legal proceedings in the Commonwealth as evidence of the fact that the adoption has been granted and is valid in Pennsylvania.

While there is no standard adoption order in the AOPC's CPCMS Dependency Module (as this is an Orphan's Court proceeding), a mechanism should be in place to close the dependency proceedings using the CPCMS Dependency Order for Termination of Court Supervision form (PA Children's Roundtable Initiative, 2009, p.14).

Finally Pa.R.P.O.C 15.6 requires the county agency to file a praecipe regarding specific termination of parental rights, adoption, and appellate court information with the clerk of courts using the dependency proceedings caption. This information is used to provide comprehensive information to local courts regarding permanency outcomes for dependent children.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR THE ADOPTION HEARING

Questions for adoptive parents:

1. Have there been any changes since the home study was completed?
2. Tell me how you feel about today.
3. Do you know what an adoption is?
4. Can you testify today that you adopted (child's name) long before you got here today and today just makes it final?
5. Do you understand all the responsibilities and the legal obligations that come with the adoption? What does that mean?
6. Tell me something special about (child's name).
7. How does (child's name) fit in with the rest of your family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters)?
8. Can you introduce any family and friends here today with their relationship to child's name (here court often just goes around the room allowing everyone to introduce themselves)?

Questions for the younger adoptee:

1. Tell me your name.
2. What do you like to do at home with your mom and dad?
3. Who's the best cook in the family?
4. What do you like to do with your brothers/sisters?

Questions for Adoptee over 12 for consent:

1. Tell me your name.
2. Where do you live and who lives there with you?
3. What grade are you in and how is school?
4. What's your favorite subject?
5. What do you like to do after school?
6. What do you like to do with your mom and dad?
7. Tell me how you feel about your mom and dad.
8. Tell me how your mom and dad feel about you.
9. Did you sign the consent for adoption?
10. Do you want to be adopted today or do you think you've been adopted long before today?
11. Do you wish to be known as the name that was given to the court?

Questions for the Agency:

1. With whom are you employed (position and length of service)?
2. How did you become involved in the placement of this child and adoptive parents?
3. Did your agency prepare the home study concerning the adoptive parents?
4. Are there any material changes since that report was prepared?
5. Other than normal agency, court, or legal fees, has anything else been promised to be paid concerning the placement of this child?
6. Are you in favor of this adoption?
7. Why do you believe this is in the child's best interest?

Questions for family and friends (if not already covered above):

1. Is there anybody in the courtroom who wants to say something about this adoption?
2. Please stand up, identify yourself, and tell us how you feel about today...
3. What hopes do you have for (child's name) and family?