

Adopting While Living in Europe

By Dana Barton & Ellie Dozier

Chocolate chip cookies. Building a family through adoption. Are these two items similar in anyway? Yes! First, let's talk about cookies.

One day a thought comes to your mind that you would like to bake some chocolate chip cookies. You flip through your recipe file for your mom's favorite recipe. You reference a few cookbooks. You go on-line and do a Google search which has 5,670,000 results for chocolate chip cookies. Whew! Which recipe do you use? Which one will turn out the best?

The process of adoption also begins with a thought or feeling that you would like to adopt a child. You read a magazine article or a book on the topic. You talk to someone who has already expanded their family through adoption. Your Google search on this topic shows about 225,000,000 sites to choose from. You feel overwhelmed and wonder, "Where do I start? Is this even possible?" Not to mention you are living in Europe.

Despite millions of recipes for chocolate chip cookies most all have similar basic ingredients such as flour, shortening and sugar. The ingredient amounts, mixing instructions and baking times may vary but the end result is chocolate chip cookies. Likewise, it takes several basic ingredients and time to create a blended family through adoption. The great news is the 'adoption kitchen' is available to you even while living overseas. So let's talk about adoption – there is a lot to learn!

Adoption begins with an idea and is developed through many decisions and activities. One of the first decisions is, "What type of adoption should you pursue?" There are two options: 1) Domestic adoption or adopting a child with American citizenship or 2) International adoption when the child is a citizen of another country. It is wise to look at several 'adoption cookbooks' to help choose the type of adoption that is best for you. Both types of adoption can be completed while living in Europe.

Domestic adoption could be a private placement where you know an individual wanting to place their child for adoption. You may consider involving the services of professional adoption workers such as attorneys or medical offices. Some prospective adoptive parents write letters or personal profiles that are confidentially maintained and shared with birth parents who are considering a placement plan for their child. The foster care system in the United States is also a source for domestic adoptions. These are handled on a state-by-state basis. For example, the state of Oklahoma has worked with military families and is actively recruiting American families living overseas.

International adoptions are most often directed by an experienced agency and/or facilitator with expertise in working with other countries. There are many adoption agencies that you can choose from. You can learn about various agencies on the Internet, attend adoption support groups or the European Adoption Symposium. Networking with others who have had a successful international adoption is very helpful. If you are considering an international adoption you will also have to decide which country or countries you would like to work with.

Several common ingredients are needed for both a domestic and international adoption. First, a home study must be completed by a U.S. licensed social worker. There are a number of

qualified social workers living in Europe. A home study is a guided process in which you develop a document representing your life experiences, goals, adoption plans, home environment and community. The home study helps you explore many facets of adoption. For example, what age child would you like to consider? Do you have a gender preference? Would you consider a mentally or physically handicapped child? Would you consider an older child or sibling group? Completing a home study is a thought-provoking experience and is used to represent you during the adoption process. All adoptions require a home study.

Another ingredient is paperwork. There will be lots of paperwork such as forms to fill out and documents to obtain. This will include items such as birth certificates, marriage licenses (if married), a statement of net worth, medical reports, income tax data, police clearance and letters of reference. If your choice is an international adoption additional paperwork is required by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). All can be completed while living abroad with the assistance of phones, the U.S. Postal Service, fax machines and email. If you work a military and/or government job here in Europe you already know how to fill out a lot of forms quickly and efficiently! At times it might feel like you are making jambalaya instead of chocolate chip cookies but it is still a step-by-step process to complete the needed paperwork. If you work with an adoption agency or facilitator their assistance will be most valuable in monitoring the quantity and quality of this ingredient.

Money is also an essential ingredient. There will be expenses for obtaining and certifying documents, agency fees, and transportation. Be assured that even if you don't have Angelina Jolie's bank account you can still adopt a child. Costs are highly variable depending on the type of adoption you choose. For example, a domestic adoption through the U.S. foster care system will be less costly than doing an international adoption with the country of Guatemala. You may be able to save money prior to starting your adoption journey. You may want to consider a loan. There are many lending institutions available and even some adoption agencies have grants you can apply for as well as information on loans specifically designed for adoption expenses. There are tax credits that apply when adopting. The cost, in general, is similar to the expenses related to buying an automobile.

When your home study, completed paperwork and finances are mixed together you have the foundation for the ultimate goal of connecting with a child or children who need a permanent home. The mixing process undoubtedly will require patience, determination, and perseverance. Some recipes for adoption are long and involved. Others are short and assemble quickly. Unfortunately, there may be occasions when the recipe flops and you have to start over. That's when you need an extra scoop of patience, determination and perseverance!

Networking and getting good advice on adoption is now easier than ever. There are support groups around the world and on the Internet. These support groups bring together families who are either considering adoption, in the middle of the process, or have completed an adoption. Whether a group is face-to-face or electronic they can give you first hand knowledge of the many different aspects of adoption.

Despite the similarities between baking chocolate chip cookies and working towards an adoption there is one big difference. Cookies will bring momentary satisfaction to your palate. A blended family, created through adoption, brings immeasurable joy.

Resources to highlight:

Support Group, Home Study Providers and the European Adoption Symposium Information:
www.usadopteurope.com

General Information on Adoption:
<http://www.adoption.com>

Adoption Laws for the 50 States:
http://www.law.cornell.edu/topics/Table_Adoption.htm

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse:
<http://naic.acf.hhs.gov>

Adoption Benefits Guide for Federal Employee's:
http://www.opm.gov/employment_and_benefits/worklife/officialdocuments/handbooksguides/adoption/index.asp

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services:
<http://uscis.gov/graphics/index.htm>