International Home Study Guide

NIGHTLIGHT CHRISTIAN ADOPTIONS- SC OFFICE
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Our mission

Is to share God’s love by:

- Helping children, both domestic and international, to find loving families
- Assisting birthparents and genetic parents in making a wise and loving plan for their child’s future
- Preparing families to be committed and effective parents to adoptive children
- Recognizing and advocating the personhood of pre-born children

We are committed to carrying out our mission in a way that will bring glory and honor to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

What We Do

Nightlight provides adoption services as a permanent response for children without parents through child advocacy, parent education, and lifelong support.... because every child deserves a loving family.

About Nightlight

Nightlight Christian Adoptions is a full-service, Hague accredited child placement agency and has been in operation since 1959. In 1997 we pioneered the first embryo adoption program, Snowflakes Embryo Adoption offering this unique adoption choice to families. Nightlight programs also include comprehensive International, Domestic, and Home Study services. We assist families in all 50 states with licensed offices in California, Colorado, South Carolina, Kentucky, Texas, Georgia, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Florida.

More than 2,000 domestic adoptions, 1,700 international adoptions, and 550 embryo adoptions have been completed by Nightlight.
WHAT IS A HOME STUDY?

A home study is a document that verifies that you qualify to adopt a child. A home study professional (called a certified investigator in South Carolina) meets with you in your home to ask you various questions about your background, your values, the strengths of your marriage (if applicable), your finances, and your reasons for adopting—in addition to other questions. The home visit is not a white-glove inspection, but an opportunity to get to know you and to discuss what it would mean to grow your family through adoption.

As part of our overall services, Nightlight conducts home studies for those adopting here in the United States as well as for families interested in international adoption. Nightlight also conducts home studies for those seeking to adopt foster children who are legally free for adoption through the social service departments in other states outside of SC. In addition, we also have a program called ReNewed Hope, in which children from disrupted/dissolved adoptions are available.

WHY DO I NEED A HOME STUDY?

No adoption can occur without a home study. Regardless if you are considering adopting domestically—an embryo, infant, or an older child—or a child from another country, you cannot adopt until the home study is completed.

Also, when adopting internationally, Citizenship and Immigration Services and the country from which you are adopting base your approval, in part, on a home study.

WHY SHOULD I USE A HAGUE ACCREDITED AGENCY TO CONDUCT MY HOME STUDY?

Since the Universal Adoption Act went into effect in July 2014, home studies for international adoptions are required to be conducted by a Hague-accredited adoption agency. Moreover, using an experienced agency such as Nightlight, which employs a full-time home study coordinator to oversee every facet of the home study process, will give you confidence that you will meet all the requirements for Immigration and the country from which you are adopting.

In addition, we can provide guidance throughout the process. As an agency, we are required by the State of South Carolina to have two face-to-face visits with you; one must be in your home and one of these can be at Nightlight’s office or another convenient location. Depending on the country you are adopting through, more visits may be required.
During these meetings, we will discuss the issues associated with the adoption process, telling your child of his or her adoption, multicultural issues, attachment and bonding, and other core issues. In pursuing an international adoption, we will also discuss being a conspicuous family, adopting an older child, issues related to receiving a child from overseas, birth order when adopting, and other matters such as adopting a child with special needs.

If you are working with another agency to conduct the actual adoption (called the placing agency), Nightlight will honor your commitment to that agency and will conduct your home study and sign all agreements between Nightlight (the home study agency) and the placing agency.

**WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE HOME STUDY?**

During the home study process, you will meet with your home study worker at least twice. This is a time of getting to know you. This is not a “white-glove” inspection, but a time where we can visit your home and see that it is safe and reasonably clean for a child. As required by law, we also meet with each adult member of the household individually. This does not mean that we have to set up a separate appointment; sometimes the husband will go in another room while we talk with the wife, and vice versa. Also, we will meet with your children briefly and ask them a few age appropriate questions. If you have adult children not living in the home, we will contact them by phone to ask them questions about their relationship with you growing up and their relationship with you now.

During the interview we want to find out about you and what makes you the person you are. We want to learn of your strengths, and we also believe that there is strength in weakness, so even if everything about you is not “perfect,” we want to find out what you learned from mistakes or difficulties in your life.

Some of the topics covered in the home study include: your background, your lifestyle and interests, your marriage, parenting or experience with children, any criminal record, financial stability, and the type of child you seek to adopt. Although the home study is assessing your physical, mental and emotional ability to parent a child, we will also focus on education—so that it will be a time of learning and preparation for you as you seek to bring a child into your family through adoption.

**TIPS REGARDING HOME VISITS**

- Please ask your social worker if they have pet allergies or sensitivities and make proper arrangements for pets prior to your visit.
• In general, count on the social worker being in your home for about 1.5-2 hours. Usually after two hours, it is difficult to answer questions and to remember what is being presented. Sometimes additional visits are scheduled to complete interviews or to offer additional education.

• Make sure all of your children (and any adults) who live in the home are there; but also make sure that they can go to a different room so that you can speak privately without interruption.

**CAN I HAVE THE HOME STUDY VISIT IN THE EVENING OR ON THE WEEKEND?**

Our staff is flexible and a social worker can generally arrange a time for a home visit that is convenient for you and your family. Nightlight also respects the personal time off of our employees and therefore requests that one of the home visits occur during normal business hours while the other may be done in the evening if needed. Please coordinate your visits directly with your social worker.

**WHAT PARTS OF SOUTH CAROLINA DOES NIGHTLIGHT WORK IN?**

Nightlight provides home study services for the entire state of South Carolina.

**WHAT SERVICES DOES NIGHTLIGHT PROVIDE?**

In addition to conducting home studies in South Carolina, Nightlight offers a range of other services to its clients.

*Adoption Advice and Advocacy*- Nightlight can assist you in deciding what type of child may be appropriate for you to consider. We serve as more than just a home study agency; we serve as your advocates.

*Education*- Nightlight is very committed to educating families. If you are adopting internationally, you will complete an outline provided by Nightlight to demonstrate that you have educated yourself on a range of topics as required by the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. If Nightlight is just your home study agency, then your placing agency may have educational requirements that you will complete through them.

Adoption education helps you determine what type of adoption is right for you, and it also prepares you for parenting a child whose background may require special skills. Not every issue can be addressed while you are going through the home study process. Additional education will make you more confident during the adoption process, and it will connect you with resources that you can use as you continue to educate yourself about adoption for the rest of your life.
**Information Regarding South Carolina’s Non-Recurring Cost Reimbursement** If you bring home a child on a guardianship program (e.g., from India, Korea, Uganda) instead of adopting your child in-country, you most likely are eligible to receive the SC adoption subsidy of $1,500 per child. You must apply for this before you adopt your child in the US. Please request this form if needed.

**Notarization of Documents** If you need documents notarized, most of our staff are notary publics, and we will gladly notarize your documents at no charge. (Naturally, we have to observe you sign the documents.) Also, there is no cost to provide you with notarized copies of the agency’s licenses, “true and accurate” statements, etc.

**Post-Adoption Support and Counseling** Nightlight offers post adoption support as well as professional counseling services. We are also available to talk with you about adjustment issues or parenting issues once you are home with your child.

**Post-Adoption Paperwork** Once your child is home with you, you will need to make sure your child is a U.S. citizen, has proof of this status, and obtains a social security card as well as obtain a South Carolina certificate of foreign birth. We can help provide information for getting these tasks accomplished.

**WHEN SHOULD I HAVE A HOME STUDY?**

Regardless of what adoption plan you choose, it is usually best to have the home study completed as early as possible in the adoption process. However, before you begin an international home study, it is best for you to know the country from which you want to adopt and what agency will be your placing agency (if you are not adopting through Nightlight).

**WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT AN INTERNATIONAL HOME STUDY?**

If you are starting an international adoption with a placing agency other than Nightlight, the agency will need to enter into an agreement with Nightlight to conduct the home study. The home study must also be reviewed by your placing agency (if not Nightlight or by the country coordinator if adopting through Nightlight) to make sure that it meets the requirements of the country from which you want to adopt.

Regardless of whether you are adopting from a non-Hague country or a Hague country, the home study is submitted to the National Benefit Center where it is reviewed by Citizenship and Immigration Services. Immigration then sends your home study packet and approval to the National Visa Center, which then sends your approval (cable 37) to the US Embassy/Consulate where you will eventually get your child’s visa.
IS A HAGUE-COUNTRY HOME STUDY DIFFERENT FROM A NON-HAGUE-COUNTRY HOME STUDY?

Historically, there have been some differences in requirements between a Hague-compliant and non-Hague international home study based on whether the client was adopting from a Hague country, such as China, or a non-Hague country such as Ukraine. However, because of the Universal Accreditation Act of 2012, which requires all international home studies to meet Hague standards and went into effect as of July 14, 2014, Nightlight now conducts all international home studies to meet the Hague standards. Therefore, Nightlight has identical requirements whether you are adopting from a Hague or non-Hague country.

A requirement for a Hague adoption is that we obtain clearances from each state/country in which you have resided since you were 18 years old. This can take a few weeks to complete. However, obtaining clearances from other countries can take an extraordinary length of time and much effort. Therefore, there is a $50 fee for each country clearance. Because of the time involved in obtaining these clearances from other countries, we recommend that these clearances begin to be processed before a home study visit is scheduled so that your home study completion is not delayed by waiting for your clearances to be returned. Fortunately, once these clearances are completed, they NEVER expire and can be used for subsequent home studies if needed.

HOW LONG IS MY HOME STUDY CURRENT?

An international home study must be less than six months old when submitted to CIS (Citizenship and Immigration Services). A home study for a non-Hague country is then current for 18 months after you receive approval on the I 600 A. If you are adopting from a Hague Convention country, the home study expires when the FBI criminal clearances expire (15 months after your fingerprints are taken).

Sometimes adoptions do not occur as quickly as desired or expected, and the approval from Immigration (called the I 171 H or I 800A Adoption Approval) expires before the adoption overseas takes place, which also means that your home study expires. Immigration does not charge fees ($720) for the renewed I 600A or I 800 A when you submit the first updated home study before the I 171 H or the I 800 A Adoption Approval expires; neither are you charged for the fingerprints to be taken again ($85 per person initially fingerprinted). However, you must submit your new home study within three (3) months before your Immigration approval expires; otherwise, you can be charged for submitting a new I 600 A or I 800 A.

While the first update for immigration approval and FBI clearances are offered at no fee, there is a fee for the home study. An expired home study (or nearly expired) initially conducted by Nightlight (and less than two years old) is half the fee of the original home study. The home study provider must complete a new home visit with you to identify changes that have occurred and then include those changes in an updated home study report.
Therefore, be sure to contact Nightlight approximately 4 months before your Immigration approval is ready to expire. THIS IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY, SO WHEN YOU RECEIVE YOUR APPROVAL FROM IMMIGRATION, PLEASE MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOUR MONTHS BEFORE YOUR APPROVAL EXPIRES.

WHAT IF I FAIL TO COMPLETE MY HOME STUDY REQUIREMENTS WITHIN ONE YEAR?

Upon signing the home study agreement, you are agreeing to complete your portion of the home study requirements in a timely manner. If at the one-year mark from the beginning of your home study process, the home study has not been completed due to your own failure to finalize documents, parent education, and/or visits, your file will be closed. In the event that you wish to have your file reopened after the one-year mark and continue working on your home study, you will be charged a home study update fee to reopen your file and finalize your home study (in addition to updating any documents that have expired and paying mileage for an additional home visit, if it has been six months or more since your last visit). If your file is closed out after a year and you do not wish to reopen your file and finalize your home study, you will not be refunded any of the home study fee payment. Also, if your home study social worker is having difficulty receiving a response from you regarding finalizing documents, parent education, and/or visits at the 6-month mark, you will receive a reminder about your agreement to complete your home study requirements within one year.

WHAT IF I WANT TO ADOPT AN OLDER CHILD OR ONE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS?

If you would consider adopting a child with special needs, an older child, or a sibling group, we will be sure that your home study addresses (1) what special needs you are open to considering and (2) what you would consider on a case-by-case basis.

If you want to adopt a child with special physical/medical needs, or a child who may face emotional/psychological issues due to the child being older or having a difficult background, these issues must be carefully addressed with you by the home study provider. In addition, you will need to demonstrate that you are well educated in adoption-related issues, are prepared, have the resources to adopt such a child, and that you will remain committed to being further educated throughout the adoption process and beyond.

It is best to be home study approved for the widest range of options that are potentially acceptable to you and for which your home study provider feels you are capable of dealing with. Of course, being approved for special cases does not obligate you to accept a placement that you’re not comfortable with. However, if a special case (such as a sibling group) becomes available it will be beneficial to have already been approved for the necessary special needs rather than having to have an addendum to your home study.
Many people worry needlessly that they may not be approved to adopt. It is very important that you be completely honest and up-front with the investigator so that if there are any areas of concern, such as a criminal history, the circumstances can be explained in the home study report. A less-than-perfect record will not automatically disqualify you. Please remember that when a social worker conducts your home study, she is not looking for reasons to disqualify you; she simply wants to know that you are capable of providing a child with a loving and secure environment. When an agency caseworker writes your home study, she is your advocate. The caseworker will present you in the best light.

If you think something in your past may present a problem, talk with us about the matter. Some people naturally worry about arrests made when they were much younger. However, other problems are more serious, such as repeated divorces, a recent recovery from alcoholism, or a recent criminal history. Please be up-front in telling us about these potential problems.

Issues of abuse must also be addressed in the home study. If you were the victim of abuse, be prepared to explain how you have overcome this abuse. The reason the social worker must discuss this issue with you is to make sure that that the past abuse has been dealt with in a healthy way, and that a child from a difficult background is not going to “push your buttons” and perhaps trigger problems in your life that you have not sufficiently resolved. Nightlight will always abide by professional and legal standards of confidentiality.

The following “issues” will not automatically disqualify you as adoptive parents:

- **You are divorced.** If you have been divorced (even more than once), you can still adopt. A caseworker will ask you about your previous marriage(s), but the main concern is the stability of your current marriage.

- **You are receiving counseling.** If you or your spouse has been in counseling individually, or if you have had counseling as a couple, your chances of being approved are probably not lessened. In fact, most agency personnel view counseling as a sign of strength. Counseling to deal with issues related to infertility, communication, or family of origin are considered very normal.

- **You have a history of drug or alcohol abuse.** If you used illicit drugs in the past, do not have a record, and no longer use them, then past drug use is not necessarily an issue. If you have been treated for abusing drugs or alcohol addiction, however, you will need to tell the home study provider. Usually this information will not disqualify you, but the agency staff will want evidence from a treatment counselor that you have resolved this problem and your risk of abusing a substance again is minimal. Nightlight staff will want more information regarding why you entered treatment, what the course of treatment was, and whether you followed the treatment plan. In addition, we will require a letter stating that you are no longer addicted to drugs and alcohol and that you are doing well.
• **You have a history of psychological problems.** If you have been treated for a psychological disorder, such as depression or anorexia, and it has not been a life-dominating problem, then this need not be an issue. But if the problem interferes with your day-to-day life (say, you are not able to work), then this will need to be discussed further. The Americans with Disabilities Act prohibits an adoption agency from disqualifying you from adopting based on a diagnosis alone; however, if you are currently experiencing problems that would interfere with the safety of a child, then this could prevent you from obtaining an approved home study.

• **You have taken or are taking psychotropic medication.** Taking such medication cannot disqualify you from adopting. We will discuss any medications you are currently taking and will want to know how effective they are in treating a given diagnosis.

• **You have a criminal history.** A criminal history will not automatically disqualify you, but it is important that you disclose any criminal history that you have. Failure to do so can result in your being automatically disapproved. You also need to provide a signed letter explaining why you were charged with each crime—and include a statement of remorse, if appropriate. Please talk with someone here at Nightlight about these documents if you need further explanation.

• **You have a chronic health condition.** If you have a physical disability this should not disqualify you from adopting so long as you can care for a child. Neither should a chronic disease, such as diabetes, disqualify you, provided it is controlled. Even a history of cancer will not disqualify you from adopting, as long as you have close to a normal life expectancy. The purpose of the medical report for the home study is to determine that the parent is expected to have a normal life span and to be able to care for a child.

• **You come from a dysfunctional family.** If you have come from a dysfunctional family and have dealt with the issues appropriately—and if other facets of your life are in order—then a social worker will discuss with you your family’s past and will focus on your life now.

• **Financial difficulties and other problems.** If you have had financial difficulties, such as bankruptcy, these problems do not necessarily keep you from adopting. We will discuss how you have handled past financial difficulties and will want to ensure you can financially afford to support an adopted child now.

If your background has had some “bumps” and you are a solid family that can provide a child with a good family life, we may recommend that you receive counseling. This can benefit everyone, and it can provide an opportunity to present you in the best possible way.

### HOW DO I APPLY WITH CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES TO OBTAIN APPROVAL?

Everyone who adopts internationally must be approved by Citizenship and Immigration Services. If you are adopting from a non-Hague country, you will submit an I-600A for this process. If you are adopting from a Hague country, you will use form I-800A. Below are instructions for these forms:
I-600A and I-800A Forms

To begin the process, complete either an I-600A (for non-Hague country adoptions) or an I-800A (for Hague-country adoptions) (forms and instructions may be obtained and downloaded at http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis) and mailed to the USCIS Lockbox.

Your form must be accompanied by a check for the processing fee ($720), as well as a fingerprinting fee ($85, “biometric services”) for each adult (18 years old or older) living in your household.

- When submitting your I-600A or I-800A application and the applicable fees to USCIS, you must also include your original home study, a copy of the agency’s license and photocopies of the following documents:
  - Birth certificate for each petitioner (husband and wife) as well as for any other members of the household
  - Marriage certificate for the petitioners
  - Adoption decrees for any adopted children (if applicable)
  - Divorce decree(s) for either or both petitioners (if applicable)
  - Death certificate(s) (if widowed)
  - Court disposition for any crimes or misdemeanors committed by either petitioner or adults living in the home, along with the applicant’s letter of remorse signed under penalty of perjury
  - Be sure that your name on your I-600A or I-800A matches the name on your passport. Otherwise you will have to submit a Supplement 3 or start the process over with a new application.

Mailing the forms - Once you mail the I-600A or the I-800A form to USCIS, it will be forwarded to the National Benefits Center (NBC). The NBC will review the form and your home study and then issue you a fingerprinting appointment for the Greer, South Carolina or Charleston, SC USCIS office.

If you need to reschedule your fingerprinting appointment, you must contact your assigned USCIS location. You will be assigned to an office for your fingerprint appointment based on your residential zip code. Your I 800 Adoption Approval expires when your FBI clearance expires and must be renewed as well as your home study—which must be updated. If you file an I 600 A, your FBI clearances expire (at 15 months) before your Immigration approval expires (at 18 months) as the I 171 H approval is valid for 18 months. Watch the dates of your FBI expiration carefully, as you do not want to travel overseas to get your child if the FBI approval is about to expire. Check with your placing agency or Nightlight as to the process of getting only your FBI clearances updated through Immigration.
**HOW DO I TRACK MY FILE WITH NBC/IMMIGRATION?**

If you would like to track your file and receive updated information as to the status of your application and approval, you can file Immigration form G 1145. Go to [http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/g-1145.pdf](http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/g-1145.pdf) to print out the form and mail it in with your I-600 A or I-800 A form.

**WHAT IS THE FEE FOR A HOME STUDY?**

In this packet you will find a list of fees for various kinds of home study services. Please refer to the last page of this booklet, the *Quick Reference List of Home Study Fees*.

We charge mileage at the federal rate for home study and post-placement visits, calculated from our office (if you are assigned a social worker from our Greenville location). If you live in other areas of the state that we have social workers available (such as Charleston and Beaufort) then mileage will be calculated from your social worker’s home.

**HOW LONG DOES A HOME STUDY TAKE TO COMPLETE?**

A *typical home study* will be completed in **approximately 8 weeks**. (This is the time from when Nightlight receives a family's initial documents and home study fee to the time that Nightlight submits the home study to the appropriate authority.) Of course, this timeframe assumes that a family submits all documents according to schedule, that they are able to schedule the necessary home study visits in a timely manner and that there are no significant counseling or criminal issues that must be resolved before a recommendation for adoption can be made by Nightlight. (Because some countries, such as China, require there to be more than two home study visits, the process for these countries could take a little longer than the 8 week average.)

**WHAT IS THE FEE FOR AN UPDATE OR ADDENDUM?**

If Nightlight conducted a home study for you within the last 2 years, your new home study will be half the cost of the initial pre-placement report. Other fees may be incurred as well such as travel/mileage expenses and post-placement/adoption reports.

If Nightlight has conducted your home study and the home study requires an additional home visit and addendum to reflect changes in your situation, the visit and addendum will cost the same as one post-placement/adoption visit and report: $300. If the addendum does not require a home visit, the fee will be $100. Any change to the home study after the report is completed – whether the change is requested by the family or by the family’s placing agency – is considered an addendum and will be invoiced to the family.
SUPPORT PLAN

Sometimes when families adopt an older child or one with more serious special needs, they become overwhelmed and feel that they need more than the usual day-to-day support. Nightlight, as your home study agency, wants to be the first contact you make (as well as your placing agency if different from Nightlight). We are closest to you and can see you face-to-face to provide that help. Most families have some struggles but manage to get through the hurdles, but about one-third of families have more significant issues and need outside resources. We do not want you to struggle alone and ask that you put a plan in place of those who can be a support to you in the event that you need time alone, extra hands in your home, or counseling for you and your child, and in more serious situations, a place where your child can go for some time.

Nightlight can provide counseling and support as well as furnish the names of those who can come into your home to provide therapeutic techniques to help you and your child adjust.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Before your social worker can schedule your first home visit, you must complete and submit the following to our office:

- **Online Application for Home Study**
- **Home Study Fee**
- **Your Phase 1 Documents**

After your home study application has been accepted (or your program orientation completed for Nightlight clients), our South Carolina home study manager will email you instructions for Nightlight’s online home study document system. This system allows you to download fillable PDF’s, complete the forms on the computer, sign with an electronic signature, and upload back into the home study document system without ever having to print. This system guides you through the various forms and paperwork required for the home study process.

Home study paperwork includes financial information, residential history form, autobiographies, background checks, and copies of birth certificates and marriage certificates, reference letters, and other related items. Completing the forms can be a bit confusing, so feel free to call Nightlight or email us with any questions you have in completing these forms.
Following this page are fee schedules/agreements for each home study program. Find your program and return that schedule/agreement signed. *Mileage is charged for any mileage that is beyond a 60-miles roundtrip. Nightlight uses the Federal Mileage Rate to assess mileage charges. In addition, families will be invoiced for meals purchased by their social worker when they travel for home visits.*

### International Home Studies

- Pre-placement home study report ............... $2,100

### OTHER SERVICES

- Hague Home Study Update..........................$1,050
- Addendum to current home study ............... $300
- Addendum not requiring home visit............. $100
- Re-Adoption Court report..........................$500

### Post-Placement Reporting for All Clients

*All clients sign a Post-Placement Fee Agreement in addition to their international home study agreement. Post-placement fees depend upon the number of post-placement reports required by the country you are adopting from.*

### Post Adoption reports for non-Home Study Clients

*Post adoption reports completed by Nightlight for non-home study families are $500 for the first report and $200 for each report following the first one.*