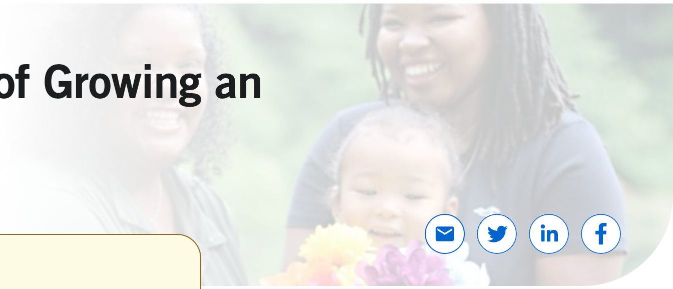


The Financial Challenges of Growing an LGBTQ+ Family

5 min read • Jun 24, 2022 • Eric Rosenberg

Key takeaways

1. Adoption and medically assisted pregnancies can be costly.
2. Planning ahead and saving for large expenses is helpful.
3. Working with trusted experts can help you save money.

Corritta and Mea Lewis sit in their temporary Tampa, Florida residence when a toddler rushes in looking for his mom. His mothers are discussing their finances—an important factor in any couple's lives. But two-year-old Caleb isn't concerned with the decision-making and life-changing process that brought him into his mothers' lives. He only wants to play.

Corritta and Mea, each 32 when they got together, knew they wanted kids. But like other LGBTQ+ couples, the steps to get there weren't simple. That's because to add children to their family, same-sex partners commonly must choose between adoption, finding a sperm donor and seeking out a surrogate mother. And those options come with costs.

The Lewises saw what lay ahead. California natives who hit the road as travel bloggers focusing on young families—Mea left her job; Corritta stayed with hers remotely (hence Tampa; they've moved again since)—they socked away every penny they could toward the costs they'd incur getting pregnant (Corritta was the birth mom). Luckily, they'd find a way to save money during the adoption process that would make Caleb Mea's legal son too.

Photo courtesy of Corritta Lewis

Family in bloom: With lots of planning and a little luck, Mea (left) and Corritta Lewis brought Caleb into the world without upending their finances.

If you and your partner have made the exciting decision to add a child to your family, you may already **have a plan** that includes how to conceive, carry or adopt. Then too, you may need guidance navigating your choices—and your finances.

Here are some tips to help you get on track.

LGBTQ+ couples have options

Like many couples, the Lewises knew each other from their youth. Corritta, a human resources analyst, met Mea, a preschool teacher turned online business owner, in high school. But it wasn't until a decade later, when they reconnected on Facebook, that they knew they wanted to be more than friends. They moved in together in August 2017, married four months later, and began trying to have children three months after that.

The Lewises decided to use a sperm bank to have a baby. The cost was about $1,000 per attempt to buy sperm for self-insemination at home, but Corritta had been saving for years, knowing that the expense was coming. It's not uncommon to need (and pay for) multiple attempts, though. After their third try, Corritta and Mea choose a more costly route—doctor-assisted insemination (about $2,000)—which led to a successful pregnancy.

Your basic choices:

- Adoption. According to the latest government data (from 2019), more than 400,000 children live in the foster care system without a permanent home. Then too, many couples look abroad—but this has been challenging during the pandemic, with only 1,622 such adoptions completed in 2020.
- Insemination. If your couple includes a biological female who's willing and able to carry a child, a sperm donor can be a good choice. If you know the donor (rather than working with a sperm bank), you may have to deal with additional legal issues regarding custody at some point.
- Surrogacy. Couples can use their sperm or eggs with a surrogate—someone not in the family who's willing to carry and deliver the baby. Again, this may require additional legal legwork for custody arrangements. If you hire a surrogate through an agency in the U.S., costs can be as high as $150,000. Going abroad can lead to significant savings—total expenses are about $50,000, for example, in South America or Eastern Europe.

There's no right or wrong way to go about this—only what's suitable for your needs. With a good understanding of whether you want to adopt, carry the baby, find a surrogate or try some other method to grow your family, you can begin work on the financial and legal planning.

Medically-assisted pregnancies and adoption can be expensive

Adoption can be expensive, but according to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, costs can vary depending on how you go about the process. (You may also quailfy for assistance.)

For example, if you adopt through the fostering system, costs are generally low, and you may even qualify for a subsidy. Private agency adoptions run about $20,000 to $45,000; international adoptions, typically $20,000 to $50,000. Independent (aka open or private) adoptions are agreements between birth and adoptive parents that the process should go forward; they typically cost $15,000 to $40,000.

Meanwhile, intrauterine insemination (IUI, a type of artificial insemination) typically costs $300 to $1,000, while in vitro fertilization (IVF, where eggs are removed from a woman's ovary and combined with sperm outside the body to form embryos) may run $15,000 or more.

Unfortunately, these costs often aren't covered by insurance for LGBTQ+ couples. The reason: Many insurance plans require that you attempt natural conception for at least a year before the coverage kicks in; LGBTQ+ families typically don't qualify unless one member is considered infertile.

Some employers and organizations offer financial support for adoption or fertility treatments, but this varies widely by location and company. Many families end up paying tens of thousands of dollars out of pocket.

Plan for legal fees

Savvy parents don't overpay for adoption. Corritta was planning on expensive attorney fees, but her lawyer advised that she could complete the paperwork herself because the adoption was uncontested (the couple only wanted to extend legal rights to the second parent). "I had already done research and contacted an attorney. It was easier and cheaper to do it ourselves," she says. The Lewises completed the process when Caleb was 10 months old.

What's more, Mea was able to get full parental rights and adopt Caleb for just $45. She worked through the process on her own, but not everyone can if their circumstances are different from the Lewises—and the cost difference can be substantial: Court processing fees for an uncontested adoption often range from $500 to $2,000, while legal fees can run upward of $6,000.

During the pregnancy and adoption, the Lewises lived in San Diego, California, where the rules were in their favor: Because they were married and used an anonymous donor, they only had to provide birth and marriage certificates, a statement from the fertility clinic, a release from the sperm bank and adoption forms to the court. "They made copies for us for $0.25 per page," Corritta explains. "And if you're married, you don't have to do a home study [a screening of prospective adoptive parents' home and life]."

While the adoption was inexpensive, the cost of four fertilization attempts wasn't. Corritta was glad to have saved up for two years for the expense—and to get help from professionals. "I was able to get our primary physician to sign a medical necessity form for us to use our FSA [flexible spending account] to purchase the sperm," she explains. "Everything else was out of pocket. We paid for the IUI. Absolutely nothing was covered by our insurance," which Corritta had through her employer. But once Corritta became pregnant, her workplace policy covered most costs for doctor appointments and delivery.

Costs of LGBTQ+ parenting

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s most recent estimate (from 2015), the average middle-income family can expect to spend about $234,000—nearly $13,000 a year—to raise a child to age 18. (That doesn't include the likely six-figure price of a college education.) Last year the nonprofit Plutus Foundation took a deeper dive on the individual expenses involved in parenting. They found, for example, that the cost of child care and pre-K–12 education alone will set parents back roughly $37,400 per child.

If you expect to send your young one to college, plan on a significant expense (and start saving asap). Even at an in-state school with resident tuition, the full cost of attendance can be a severe financial burden. For the 2020–21 academic year, the cost of attending a four-year public college, including room and board, averaged about $25,700; the typical tab for a nonprofit private school more than *doubled* that, at $54,500. (Of course, those are national averages—college costs vary widely by institution, location and living arrangements. But in the past couple decades, one constant has been prices rising faster than general inflation—so parents with young children need to plan ahead.)

And while basic costs to house, feed, clothe and educate a child are similar for all families, LGBTQ+ couples may not have equal access to benefits like shared family health insurance or the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) due to state laws.

Where you live can create more hurdles

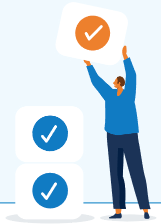
LGBTQ+ couples may run into additional challenges depending on their location. For example, rights for medical and financial decisions may not be easy to get in less LGBTQ+-friendly states. "How you conceive matters," Corritta says. "Look into that for your state. It matters where you live by county and state."

On that count, the Lewises' location during the process—Southern California—made things relatively simple. This map from the Movement Advancement Project (MAP) offers state-by-state data on LGBTQ+ legal rights.

To be sure, parenting isn't cheap or easy regardless of your sexual orientation. But as Corritta, Mea and Caleb Lewis prove, growing your family doesn't have to be a dream. With the right planning and financial prep, it can be a wonderful reality.

What you can do next

If you're considering having kids, create a financial plan—and be realistic about the costs you're likely to face and the processes you may have to consider. Automating savings or investments can help you reach financial goals like surrogacy or adoption. For legal advice and to learn more about the process, think about working with an adoption attorney or other adoption expert through the National Council for Adoption. To learn more about your options to save up for a growing family, reach out to a financial advisor as soon as you can.



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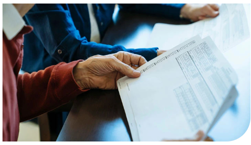

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