

Sensitively Moving the Older International Adoptee

Prospective adoptive families may experience a better transition when they keep in mind that institutionalized children have learned about group living not about family life. In general, orphanage life has a culture of its own:

- Poverty, governmental policies, lack of staff education, lack of medical care, etc. may cause an atmosphere in which the meeting of physical needs prevails—psychological needs are not the priority.
- Caregivers may not provide nurturing. They change shifts, leave to pursue other employment or may be a source of abuse. Peers leave as a result of adoption, a move to a different orphanage, illness or death. The child learns that people go away. Those who should provide me affection and protect me do not always do so.
- Orphanages utilize a regimented routine to provide for children. Children eat, go to the bathroom and sleep on a schedule. This schedule is based on a timeline created by the staff. The child may not learn to regulate bodily functions or how to express his needs.

Moving to America means being *abruptly* immersed in a totally new way of living. Pre-adoptive families may experience a taste of this “culture shock” when traveling to the adoptee’s country of origin. Recalling how it felt to be surrounded by a different language, foods, living environment, smells, sounds, etc. will help family members maintain empathy—post-placement. Other points to consider, when moving institutionalized pre-school/school-age children include:

- *Provide preparation prior to leaving the child’s homeland.* The children’s book, *Borya and the Burps*, offers vibrant photos of a child’s journey from the orphanage to the adoptive home. This book gives the prospective adoptee an idea of what is ahead. A photo album of the “new” family, home and community gives the child some advanced notice of his new living quarters and surrounding area.
- *Do not be afraid to ask for what you need from friends and family members.* If you know that your friends or family are planning a shower, speak up. Ask for gift cards to restaurants that deliver or a cleaning service. Alleviating yourself of duties that others can carry out will allow you time to get acquainted with your new son or daughter, and time to re-connect with the children already in the family. One-on-one time with your children is more important than dust bunnies under the bed!
- *Develop as realistic expectations as possible.* Read, read and read some more! Talk with others that have adopted. Identify and meet with adoption-competent medical and mental health professionals. Learn as much as you can about the impact of orphanage life on the child’s physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Institutionalized children lose one month of development for each three to four months of orphanage residence. Likely, you will be adopting a child “younger” than anticipated. Pay particular attention to the types of behavioral problems post-adoptive parents describe subsequent to the adopted child joining the family.
- *During your trip, gather as much of your child’s history as possible.* Take ample photos of the orphanage, staff, the other children and your family at the orphanage, hotel/apartment and airports. Gather the names of the children and adults you are photographing, especially if the child has a special connection to a particular caregiver or an orphanage mate. Videotape and audiotape are wonderful as well. As children mature, they will want to know where they lived, who took care of them and who helped you adopt them. Organize this information into a life book.

- *Plan to spend time at home, post-placement, gradually introducing the child to his surroundings.* Put off a trip to the mall for a few weeks or a welcome home party. Limit toys, trips to the park and restaurants. Plan to focus on setting limits, establishing boundaries and safety issues. Recognize that this adoptee needs to learn basic daily activities like crossing a street, table manners, how to act in a store, sitting with the family and watching a movie, getting up and getting dressed, etc. Prioritize the most important rules and begin to enforce them immediately. This will help facilitate the child's internal ability to monitor his own behavior.
- *Think carefully about child care arrangements.* A room full of children and staff resembles an orphanage to the formerly institutionalized child. Depending on the number of hours the child is in a child care program, the child's integration into the family may be inhibited
- *Schedule a first appointment with your adoption-competent medical clinic or mental health professional quickly after arriving home.* It is important to begin monitoring your adoptee's health and growth. Early-intervention is a main key in maintaining the emotional well-being of your entire family. Letting problems continue, year after year, with the hope the child will "grow out of it" is one of the primary reasons the family gets stuck in unproductive interactions.
- *Have your child (no matter what her age at arrival) undergo cognitive developmental testing – including a language component – in her native language immediately post-placement.* Language development contributes to literacy and thus school performance. For all children younger than age seven the assessment should be done within the first few weeks, and for those who are literate in their native language the time-frame is the first few months. Since those adopted internationally quickly begin losing their native expressive and receptive language—[language attrition](#)—letting such testing wait may mean that meaningful educational testing must be delayed until the child has fully acquired expressive and receptive language skills in English.
- [School-readiness](#) is an area that requires consultation with those professionals knowledgeable about older international adoptees. Schools tend to want to place children according to their chronological age. This manner of assigning children a grade ignores language development, social skills, self-regulation abilities, the willingness to participate in a group activity, and cognitive skills and/or neurological problems. A timely psycho-educational evaluation will reveal individual differences and educational needs of your child and lead to proper school placement.