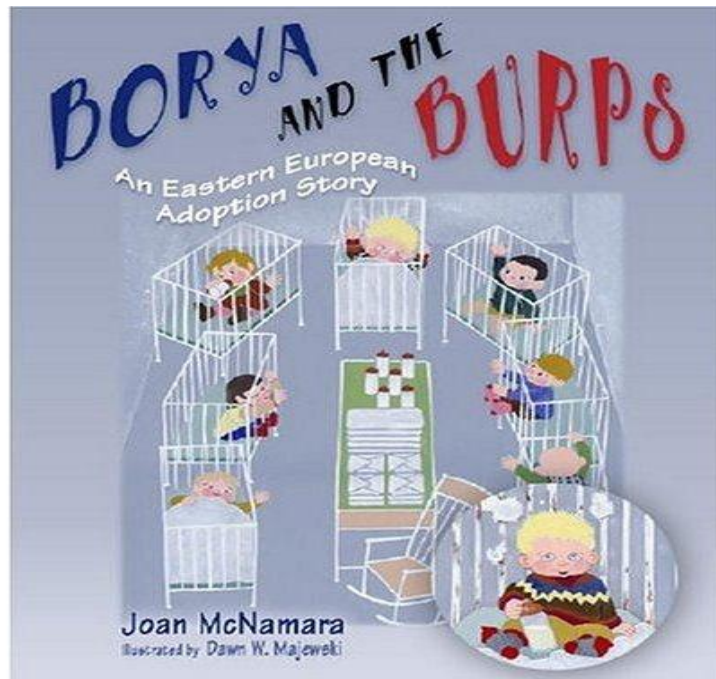


# Talking with Children about Their Orphanage Background: A Guide to Using "Borya and the Burps"

This article is taken, with permission, from [Borya and the Burps](#) by Joan McNamara. Adoptive Families magazine, in their August, 2008 issue, listed *Borya and the Burps* as one of eight "must have" picture books for young children! This article is about using *Borya and the Burps* to facilitate discussion about adoption with children of all ages—from any country!



Joan writes,

Each child is a gift to the world and should be a blessing to his family. In adoptive families, children bring into a new family the gifts of genetics, culture, and life history that must be incorporated into an understanding of the past and present. A child adopted into a family after living in an orphanage has taken a little longer, more complicated path to find the place where that gift is cherished and nurtured, a forever family. In part it has been this difficult journey that has contributed to such a child's becoming the unique little person now blossoming in your home and heart. Like a diamond, these children have become strong and shining and beautiful not only because they are cherished now, but because of pressure from the past and how they have met the unique challenges of their young lives. Welcome to the adventure of international adoption through the eyes of a young child from an orphanage.

## **Some Background**

Children grow best in families, with one parent or two to nurture, encourage and cherish them. We all know this. Even if an orphanage is as bright and cheery as your neighborhood day-care center, with appropriate nutrition, health care, and activities, children who live in group care have far fewer opportunities to learn healthy emotional connections and

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living skills, and thus have less encouragement to reach their developmental milestones and to develop positive attachments.

As adoptive parents, one of our tasks is to help our children make sense of their world and to [integrate the many strands of past and present into a cohesive sense of self](#). This may be more difficult for adoptive parents because we have to first accept that our children come to us with the rich tapestry of their past, one that may have included not only good things, but difficulties, even sad and hurtful times. And for many children, even infants, leaving what is familiar for a new family may be a sad and scary time.

Children who have lived in orphanages and are then adopted leave behind a world very different from that of their new family, but one which usually has had strong connections for this child. Even very young children bring along a wealth of memories, some accessible, some not, when they move into their adoptive families. These memories may include good times, a sense of sameness and stability, and trust in people they cared about who have cared for them. There may have been relationships with special caretakers and with other children with whom they developed ties as close as siblings. These kinds of relationships helped children begin to learn about the importance of human connections and attachment.

For other children there may be fewer good memories, perhaps because of their past abuse, neglect, abandonment or deprivation. An overcrowded orphanage with overworked staff and few resources may be unable to provide more than the barest of essentials for children in their care; it may have been too cold in the winter, too hot in the summer, with too many children to feed adequately or to give attention to. In such an environment, children may feel all alone in the middle of the crowd, where they are seldom singled out for attention and affection. They may have learned that the world is not a safe place and that grownups are not dependable creatures.

There seems to be a strong and universal human trait to reach out to a child in need. For parents, it seems almost an ingrained reflex to want to try to protect our children from pain and to ease our child's hurts.

We want our children to be happy, to have happy memories and feelings to build into a positive sense of self-esteem. But all children, whether born into or adopted into their families, inevitably have a variety of experiences in life, with a wide range of accompanying emotions. It is how these experiences and emotions are dealt with—not ignored or forgotten, but considered and incorporated into a sense of competence that one has succeeded in moving through difficulties—that in part determines how a child grows stronger and more self-assured.

This tendency to want to protect children in need is perhaps part of the reason some people think about adoption as the rescue of a child, not just the growth of a family. But what adults see as a change for the better, some children experience as a kidnapping to an alien culture. Children and grownups may have very different perceptions and emotions about the same situations.

With adoption, all of the familiar and dependable people, places, schedules, food, words, clothing, and smells are gone. In their place are new and unfamiliar things. An orphanage that seems like a less than positive, even deprived or negative place in an adult's eyes, may have been considered as a safe and familiar home to a child. A loving adoptive parent and a stable home filled with toys, pets, and security may appear like a wonderful choice for a child to the grownups involved in adoption, yet feel to a child like being ripped away from everything she has ever known. While adults rejoice with an adoption, children may have a range of confusing emotions.

Even names, what people call you and how you intimately identify yourself, may be changed. Children as young as seven and eight months can recognize their own names and the endearing nicknames caregivers croon to them that help infants place themselves in the universe. How confusing it must be in this strange new place where people don't recognize who you are!

Although *Borya and the Burps* is one of the very first books on international adoption from Eastern Europe to be widely available to families, families who have adopted from other regions of the world may find this story valuable as well. Simple comments from parents while reading about what were the same and what was different for their child can personalize this story. Adoption of children from orphanage care does share some common themes and situations in all parts of the world, and thus parents can share this story with their children no matter where their child's orphanage was located.

## *Talking with Children about Their Orphanage Background: Guide to Using "Borya and the Burps" (Part 2)*

In Part One, Joan provided a wonderful rationale for the need to share the child's adoption story even when the circumstances were less than ideal. In this part, she offers concrete ways to open dialogue with your child of any age and from any country!

### **Practical Strategies for Parents**

When you read *Borya and the Burps* with your child you are not only reading a funny and feeling story about a little boy, you are also opening the door with your child to sharing the funny, sad, joyful, and emotionally complex issues of his own and your adoption story. Many young children like to read stories more than once, which can provide more than one chance to talk, question, and share. Reading the story again may spark new questions and concerns for your child, or new directions for discussion.

I happen to think the best way to read a book with your young child, especially a story about important family and life issues, is to snuggle close. Sit your child on your lap or sit close together with your arms around each other and the stories you explore become a way for you to connect in intimate ways important for growing attachments.

Preschool children often like to relate the stories they read to themselves and their own world. After all, very young children who are loved know that they are the center of the universe (if only to those most important people in the world, their parents)! As you read to your preschooler, you may want to add short, simple comments about how this story is like or different from their own life situations. For example, while reading the pages that describe Borya and his friends in the orphanage, you might say something like,

- Your room in the orphanage had twelve cribs.
- There were two babies in your crib.
- I didn't get to meet the other babies or see your crib, so I wonder if these pictures are like what you knew in the orphanage?
- You looked scared (or confused) like Borya in this picture.
- You had striped socks (or a blue snowsuit, or a sweater) too in your picture/when we meet you at the orphanage.

Older children may already know some of this information and may have enjoyed shared stories in the family of their time in the orphanage, meeting new parents, traveling home, getting used to a new family and home. Their questions and concerns may be more complex, sophisticated, and difficult for parents to answer. Consider what issues might be brought up while reading about Borya—or brought up again now that your child is cognitively more advanced. Think about some of the common themes and questions school-aged children have related to adoption and how you might address these with your child. Some typical questions and issues are,

- But why did my birthparents decide not to be a family, and how was it that I got to the orphanage?
- Was my orphanage a nice place to be? (Hint: Orphanages try to care for children but can't do as well as families. If conditions there were not good, be honest about this.)
- Do I have siblings? Are they still at the orphanage/with birthfamily? Why?
- Why can't we help my birthmother/family? Can we meet them?
- Why can't we adopt my siblings/friends? Can we go back and visit?
- What happened to my friend (still at the orphanage or now in a new family)?
- Are my friends still okay?

If your child does not have questions or comments about Borya's adventures and feelings or about his or her own story, feel free to introduce a few of these. If your child is uncomfortable about answering questions or offering opinions, you might want to offer your own comments, but do state that your child might have different ideas and that's okay too. Discomfort in talking about adoption issues with you may indicate that your child is either in the process of trying to work through understanding these or is having a problem intellectually or emotionally with some aspect of these. You may need to return to these issues another time and gently bring them up with your child.

As you and your child lead your lives together in your adoption-expanded family, it is my hope that Borya will help you both find your way. Adoption is a complex and life-long journey for parents and children that begins with willingness to risk and to trust, and a commitment to being a family forever. Borya is finding this out in his story, as I hope that you all will.