

Talking with Children about Their Orphanage Background: Guide to Using “Borya and the Burps” (Part 2)

Today’s post is taken 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! Joan, a Perspectives Press author, is our “guest blogger” for a two-part blog about using *Borya and the Burps* to facilitate discussion about adoption with children of all ages—from any country!

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 today’s blog, 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 starts 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.