

# ADOPTION

Nicole Callahan, *editor*  
Chuck Johnson, *editor*

# ADVOCATE

NO.  
54

## Preparing Older Children for Adoption

BY RHONDA JAREMA

**I** imagine that when an older child meets his parents for the first time in preparation for a foster-to-adoption or adoption placement, his feelings might be similar to that of an astronaut about to blast off into space. It will be an entirely new experience, full of excitement and wonder – and it can also be filled with trepidation or even terror for a child facing the unknown.

Just as prospective adoptive parents need education, training, and preparation for an adoption, it is also critically important for children to receive education and preparation for an upcoming adoptive placement. Whether the child is coming from a foster home or orphanage, the things that they have known will be lost to them; life in a permanent family will be different from everything they have experienced before. There are aspects of life in permanent families that are very different than the more temporary care of foster homes or orphanages. It is important to recognize and address the parents' and the child's expectations and set up a plan for transition, so that both the child and her new family are ready and well prepared.

For both adoptive parents and adopted children, their ideas about the adoption experience and transition often differ greatly from what will be their reality. Many adoptive families anticipate that their new child will be so eager to join their family and so thankful to leave the foster home or orphanage behind, and they allow themselves to buy into the mistaken belief that any and all challenging issues can be easily overcome with love. For a child coming from an orphanage in another country, there might be unrealistic images and dreams based on glamorous television shows or movies. He likely will not fully understand or anticipate the very real



National Council  
For Adoption

225 N. Washington Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
(703) 299-6633  
[www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)

feelings of grief and loss that can accompany an adoptee that must leave behind all that he has ever known. It is important to prepare the child as fully as possible for the *reality* of his upcoming adoption experience, while recognizing that he has no context for *fully* understanding exactly what adoption will mean for him.

Every member of the adoption triad is affected by the adoption. Although this article is focused on the older child adoptee, preparation and flexibility are the keys to success for all family members. We must do everything in our power to prepare a child before she is adopted – taking into account her chronological and emotional age, and how much she can understand – so that surprises are minimized and she can go into her adoption as well prepared as possible.

Children should be as well educated about their potential adoption experience as the families that will be adopting them. It is best if a trusted caregiver begins to talk with a child prior to a possible adoption, once it is recognized that the child is eligible for adoption.

## “Adoption is forever”

A child to be adopted may not truly believe that the adoptive family is permanent, but it is important to tell her that her parents are making a lifelong commitment to her. With time, she will learn and experience and understand what a family is. At the beginning, she may be afraid, as children living outside family care are sometimes told horror stories about other children who were returned to foster or orphanage care due to poor behavior. Rather than giving the child hope about adoption, those stories can be terrifying.

Rather than beginning the relationship based on fear – such as the fear of being returned to the orphanage if he misbehaves – it is best to begin to build on a foundation of trust. That comes as the child learns about and gets to know his prospective parents. How a child is prepared for his adoption and how well the adoptive parents are able to build and encourage attachment can make the difference between a successful experience and a difficult one.

Many adopted children have expressed the fear that if they are “bad” they will “be sent back.” They must be reassured that this is not the case, or it will set up both the child and his new family for very stressful times. The child to be adopted needs to be helped to understand that once a family adopts him, that family’s home is now *his* home.

---

*A child to be adopted may not truly believe that the adoptive family is permanent, but it is important to tell her that her parents are making a lifelong commitment to her. With time, she will learn and experience and understand what a family is.*

---

Children certainly will test their new family and test their boundaries as learn the rules and expectations of their new parents – this behavior is common, and often unintentional on the child’s part. There are some children that, if told they will be sent back to the orphanage for inappropriate behavior, may see it as a return to a place of comfort and the only home they can remember; this may lead to more acting out in order to be sent back to that home. Or a child may decide not to work on adjusting to his new family and new lifestyle, as the familiar is far more comforting. It is, after all, very difficult trying to learn a new language and adapt to a different culture.

Regardless of an adopted child’s behavior, or any threats she may make to run away back “home” to the orphanage, her parents need to reassure her that this is her permanent home; they will always love her, and she is part of their family forever. A child often needs to hear this repeatedly before she comes to believe that her new adoptive home actually *is* her permanent home.

### Introducing a child to adoption

Reading stories about adoption is a helpful way to introduce young children to the idea of adoption. Although many stories are geared towards preparing siblings for the adoption of a new brother or sister, some books can also provide a good starting point for the child being adopted.

My favorite book of this type is *A Mother for Chocó* by Keiko Kasza. It is about a little bird, Choco, who is looking for his mother. After a long search, he is welcomed into a family of many different types of animals. I think this book as well as others can help small children begin to understand the concept of adoption. Although it might be difficult to find similar books in other languages if the family is adopting internationally, the pictures in this book tell the story well, even if the words are not quite understood by the child when the adult first reads the book.

It is critical for an older child to be permitted to participate in the decision to be adopted. Older potential adoptees need to understand the consequences if they choose *not* to be adopted. They must not be forced or pushed into a decision that is not of their choosing. When children are told that they should or must accept a family’s proposal for adoption some may struggle for years, never accepting the new family as their own. It is crucial that the older child being adopted really does want a family, and want to be adopted.

It is also important to give the child time to prepare for the adoption. Once a child is aware that a family will be adopting her, it is not unusual

for her to experience some anxiety. After all, the child will be leaving everything that is familiar to her and moving away from her orphanage family of friends, caregivers, and teachers, as well as any involved biological family members (which can sometimes include older siblings, aunts, uncles, or grandparents).

### Getting to know the prospective adoptive family

Pre-adoptive families complete a homestudy in preparation for their adoption. This often includes a summary biography, accompanied by photographs of the couple, their families, other children in the family, and their house and neighborhood. It is helpful if the child to be adopted is able to sit down with a trusted adult (e.g., caregiver, social worker, director of the program) to look at the pictures that have been sent and begin to become familiar with the prospective adoptive family. As the child looks at the photos, it helps her to engage with the images and see more of the reality of the family and home. When she finally meets her prospective parents/family in person, they are not complete strangers, as she is able to recognize them and has learned a bit about them from the photos.

Unfortunately, television and film representations have portrayed both foster care and orphanage care in a very negative light. Many popular movies also do not present healthy, well-adjusted families. So when a child from another country watches a movie about a family in the U.S., it will likely be very different from his actual adoptive family and their home, neighborhood, and community. Skype meetings between the prospective parent and child can help to expose the child to his new home and family in a realistic way. This also minimizes the expectation that he will be moving into the sort of home environment he might see on TV or in movies, as he will be able to see the adoptive home prior to placement.

It is helpful if the prospective parents can spend some time with the child prior to the home placement. Many countries now require a “bonding period” for parents and child. Although it can be challenging for prospective parents to take time off to visit the child prior to bringing him home, it is wonderful if they can, as it allows all of them to meet and learn about each other. Having the opportunity to visit with one another, playing simple interactive games, and talking about their likes and dislikes helps the prospective parents and child get to know one another. As they share these experiences together, it helps them build their relationship.

Sometimes, depending on the program and the country, prospective adoptive families will travel to the orphanage or foster home for the purpose of selecting a child from among those eligible for adoption.

---

*Although it can be challenging for prospective parents to take time off to visit the child prior to bringing him home, it is wonderful if they can, as it allows all of them to meet and learn about each other.*

---

Children who are instructed by orphanage staff to “just smile and look good so that a family will select you for adoption” are being set up for a depressing experience; for them, meeting prospective adoptive parents might be even more frightening. The child’s focus will then be placed on each person who looks at him, wondering: “Is this the family that will choose me?” It will be a far better experience for the child if he is instead helped to focus on the activities of day, whether playing in the playroom with his peers or going on a field trip with other families. If he is made to feel worried or pressured to check out his “potential” family, it becomes a stressful situation rather than an enjoyable one.

### Further suggestions for prospective adoptive parents

#### **Both parents and children should participate in language lessons.**

Language lessons are important in intercountry adoptions. So often, early issues with an international adoption are due to or made worse by a miscommunication. Parents should learn to speak their child’s native language as well as they can. Being able to comfort a child in her own language can make an enormous difference, especially in the beginning. Older children being adopted from another country can also often benefit from learning some English phrases prior to meeting their prospective parents. They may not be able to hold a long conversation, but being able to express basic needs makes a huge difference when both parents and child are struggling to communicate in the beginning.

**Keep a journal.** Parents and older children often create a journal of their adoption journey. Families are encouraged to create a memory book or “lifebook” of their child’s adoption that includes photographs and written memories from all members of the family, orphanage workers, etc. These books are a wonderful way to help the child understand their adoption story, both at the time of adoption and years later. If there are photos available of the child with family or friends, these should be added to the photo album that she will bring to her new home.

**Let the child keep a transitional object.** It is also helpful for an adopted child, especially an older one, to keep some item that will help remind her of her life in the orphanage or foster home; for example, if she is attached to a particular toy, it is beneficial to allow her to take it with her. This transitional object will serve as an acknowledgement and reminder of her past, and can also help bring reassurance when she is anxious in her new home.

#### **Help the child connect with another adopted child or adopted children.**

Just as prospective families are often connected with “mentor” families

that have already adopted, the child to be adopted can also benefit from a similar relationship. If there is a child of like age who has been adopted into the community where the newly adopted child will be living, making that connection between the two children can help the new child feel more comfortable in his new home. Knowing that another child from similar circumstances was also adopted and is doing well can help alleviate anxiety on the part of the newly adopted child. The two children can share similar experiences, and know that there is another person nearby who understands. This connection can help the newly adopted child feel as though he is not alone in his experience.

**Serve some of the child's favorite meals.** While it may seem fairly innocuous, the change in diet can produce a great deal of anxiety and distress for a newly adopted child. People often associate certain foods with memories from our childhood. Preparing special foods that are meaningful and familiar to the child is a wonderful way to help her feel safe in her new home. Children that have experienced hunger may have eating patterns unfamiliar to the new family, and it may be necessary, in acknowledging this, to reassure them by always having special snacks available. Sensitivity to the child's past experiences can help her realize and know that her new family is aware of and responsive to her needs.

**Consider the issue of renaming the child, and discuss with him or her if possible.** One question that nearly always arises is whether or not to change an adopted child's name. It is important to discuss this with the older child, identifying all options and asking him what he thinks. Some children have very definite opinions about changing their name, or not, when first adopted. Some children may change their names willingly, to please their new parents; others might hold firm, preferring to keep the names they have always had. Adopted children generally want to take on the new identity of their family, and incorporate that into their own identities, but they also do not want to let go of who they have been. It is a fine line to walk, to acknowledge the past while beginning a new life together, and thus it is an issue that should be decided by parents and child together in the adoption of an older child.

---

*Adopted children generally want to take on the new identity of their family, and incorporate that into their own identities, but they also do not want to let go of who they have been. It is a fine line to walk, to acknowledge the past while beginning a new life together.*

---

## Conclusion

Older adopted children have already faced many changes and challenges in their young lives. It is helpful to prepare for and minimize the changes wrought by adoption as much as possible. Significant changes should be made as gradually as possible.

An older child entering a new adoptive home cannot deny the past, nor should she be asked or expected to. That past is part of what has formed her identity and personality. Encouraging her to talk about the past helps her to share with and feel accepted by her new family. If the child sees that her new parents are able to listen and acknowledge her past, it helps her move with less fear into a new relationship with them. If parents are uncomfortable talking about the child's past, she might feel that it is something that is somehow unacceptable, and might even feel that her new family does not fully accept her.

Open communication, about the past, present, and future, helps an adopted child to build a foundation of trust with his new family. That foundation is critical, as it is the basis for a strong attachment between parent and child. For the adoption of an older child to be successful, the child must be able to trust his new parents.

An older child might well feel like an astronaut blasting off into space when first introduced to the concept of adoption, but with education and preparation, it is hoped that the child will eventually feel the same exultation as the astronaut upon completion of the mission. The adoption of a child can be a genuinely amazing, incredibly positive experience for all involved. However, it will be a major change for both parents and child, a change that requires parents to create a loving, accepting environment for the child to learn about the new family and begin to understand the commitment that has been made to her. The child and her new parents will both need preparation, ongoing support, and understanding in order for the child to achieve a successful transition from an orphanage or foster care setting into a permanent, loving family environment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rhonda Jarema, MA has worked as a social worker, advocate, and educator in the fields of international adoption and mental health for close to thirty years. Rhonda has focused her attention on international adoption ever since she adopted four older children from Russia in 1995. She has been the Director of Family Support Services at Nightlight Christian Adoptions since 1998, and currently serves as the agency's Hague Coordinator. She has published several articles on internationally adopted children and has presented at numerous NCFA and JCICS conferences. Ms. Jarema volunteers for the Council on Accreditation as a Hague Lead Evaluator and Commissioner. She is married, and is the mother of four adult children and one middle school-aged child, all adopted internationally.



National Council  
For Adoption

SUPPORT NCFA  
DONATE ONLINE ►►  
[www.adoptioncouncil.org](http://www.adoptioncouncil.org)