



# Toolkit for Adopting an Older Child



**CCAI**  
ADOPTION SERVICES

# Toolkit for Adopting an Older Child



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Published by CCAI  
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### Acknowledgements

Cover photo by **The Archibald Project**

#### About The Archibald Project:

The mission of The Archibald Project is to save lives through adoption, primarily through the use of photographing & filming families as they meet and finalize their adoptions, domestically & internationally. The Archibald Project uses their media to promote & educate the general public on the needs of adoption and accurately portray the adoption process. To learn more, please visit [www.thearchibaldproject.com](http://www.thearchibaldproject.com)

## Table of Contents

|                                                    |     |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Who is the Older Child? .....                      | 3   |
| Section 1: The First Days .....                    | 5   |
| Rejection .....                                    | 7   |
| Second Thoughts .....                              | 10  |
| Communication .....                                | 11  |
| Special Considerations for the Preteen Child ..... | 15  |
| Section 2: Meeting Basic Needs .....               | 21  |
| Sleep .....                                        | 23  |
| Food .....                                         | 26  |
| Hygiene .....                                      | 29  |
| Sensory Overload .....                             | 31  |
| Section 3: Relationships .....                     | 33  |
| Preparing for Family Life .....                    | 35  |
| Bonding and Attachment .....                       | 38  |
| Socialization .....                                | 42  |
| School .....                                       | 46  |
| Maintaining Old Friendships .....                  | 52  |
| Section 4: Parenting Challenges .....              | 57  |
| Discipline .....                                   | 59  |
| Lying .....                                        | 64  |
| Control Issues .....                               | 66  |
| Section 5: Potential Problems .....                | 69  |
| Grief and Loss .....                               | 71  |
| Sexual History and Activity .....                  | 74  |
| Aggressive Behaviors .....                         | 77  |
| Mental Illness .....                               | 80  |
| Section 6: Advice from Adoptive Parents .....      | 85  |
| Section 7: Advice from Adoptees .....              | 97  |
| Parting Thoughts .....                             | 103 |
| Additional Resources .....                         | 105 |
| Personal Resource List .....                       | 107 |



*Toolkit for Adopting an Older Child* is written to provide information to allow for realistic, flexible, and fluid expectations on adopting and parenting an older child. It is important to approach older child adoptions anticipating it to be difficult, because for many people they really are.

Education and preparation are the best tools in adopting a child of any age, especially an older child who is bringing with them their own life experiences, their own “baggage”. These children are not demons nor are they intentionally manipulative, disrespectful, or aggressive. They are survivors. They are children trying to survive a stress-filled placement with a new family. As adoptive parents, sometimes we believe we can help and change someone if we love them enough. But it takes so much more than love.

The more research a parent does before adopting an older child, the better. You have to be open to educating yourself and being utterly honest with yourself. Adoptive parents have to let go of their “ideal child” expectations while the child adapts and learns to navigate the new family structure, expectations, values, and opportunities. Most families will struggle for a couple of years, and once their child or children feel secure, things will even out. Growing pains are to be expected, some more severe than others, but with many of the issues, they become less about ‘adoption struggles’ and more normal adolescent struggles.

We have a list of questions we want you to answer as honestly as you can at the end of the book. Share your answers with your spouse, a family member, or a friend. Go over some of these questions with your other children in the home, if any, in an age appropriate manner.

The adoption of an older child is a journey with many challenges and many rewards. We want to provide you with one more “tool” to be ready to be the parent your child needs you to be for them.



## Who is the Older Child?



Who is the “older child”? We are referring to those children who are at least 5 years of age (although they could be a bit younger) up to the teen years. Obviously, this is a WIDE age range. The adjustments and struggles will vary widely. Preparation and expectations will follow a continuum based on the child’s age as well as their own life experiences and genetic makeup.

Adopting an older child is very different from adopting an infant or young toddler – your child can walk, talk, has set preferences, has clear memories of a life before you, and probably has opinions about being adopted. This means you need to walk into “Gotcha Day” with some different skills and plans than if you were to adopt a baby. This toolkit is designed to give you some “food for thought” before you move into the older child adoption realm and to also offer help for you to survive your first few days and weeks with your child, as well as provide some additional resources to access when you are ready to dive in deeper.



Additionally, we have asked families who have “been there, done that” to weigh in with their own experiences. Some transitions have been almost seamless, but many of them have presented challenges, expected and unexpected.



## Before you get started: Family Thoughts

*I would not talk to too many people with overly negative experiences. While this sometimes does occur, it has not been my experience, in reading or*

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*I would not talk to too many people with negative experiences. While this sometimes does occur, it has not been my experience that this is the norm.*

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*talking with other adoptive parents, that this is the norm. We took some wonderful pre-adoption classes. While not all information fit our situation, it was helpful. I think I overthought everything and stressed myself out about the possibilities, good and bad. I kept reminding myself to relax. Thankfully for me, I had the advantage of also having biological children that helped me to realize that all children test, have bad days and sometimes just need to cry and have a hug. This helped me to not over analyze him sometimes and realize that what he was doing or not doing could also be normal in children his age regardless of situation.*

Mom of Terry, adopted at age 5

*I do feel that we were adequately prepared for an older child. I would say that our own research combined with information from our agency and our social worker helped us. We are in a community where many families have adopted older children, and we have gotten a bit of insider information from them. We knew it would be challenging, but we always tell people that adoption is not a fairy tale, it is a challenge. Talk to other parents who have done this. Join the yahoo groups. If you have examples of what other families experienced, think through your plan to handle those things.*

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

# Section 1

## The First Days

What should you expect when you meet your child, and the first few days after your adoption? The completion of your adoption journey is exciting, thrilling, and even anxiety provoking... it can also be awkward, stressful, and full of the unexpected when adopting an older child. Your task to integrate this new person, complete with developed personality and preferences, can range from seamless to challenging depending on the child, and each family finds a way to broach this new task in their own way.



Your first few days with your child may be challenging, especially if you hope to be a happy family from the first moment. Keep in mind your primary objectives in the first few days and weeks after adopting your child are **TRUST and SAFETY**. It will take time for bonding to develop between you and your child, but focusing on these two primary objectives will set you on the right path. Pick your battles accordingly – if it isn't an issue that will impact your child's safety, it might not be worth an argument. Make a conscious effort to help your child feel safe, and provide opportunities for them to learn to trust you.



## Rejection

As excited as you are to meet and adopt your child, it can be difficult when they are not excited to meet you, or seem to want nothing to do with you.

**Be prepared for, and be OK with rejection.** Understand where your child is coming from – how does he know you'll provide for his needs? Are you what she expected? "Not liking you" can be a way to self-protect from fears that you will not provide or will abandon them later on. Be empathetic and respectful of this reaction. Understand the younger pre-teenager may have hoped she would have been adopted by a Chinese family, not a "foreigner".

**Plan some activities.** After the adoption is finalized, usually the day after you receive your child, there will be plenty of time to explore the area together. This will give your child some time to get used to the idea of being with you, and will give you chances to develop a relationship.

**Give it time.** Don't try to force anything, or work too hard to "make" your child like you or your other biological or adopted children. Be open, respectful, and give your child space. Provide consistently for your child's needs, and provide opportunities to spend time together as well as down time to adjust to each other. Remember that it takes time to develop the relationship – "claiming" and "bonding" need life experiences to grow. This is especially true for the late pre-teen or early teen child who needs time to begin to see you as "mom" or "dad". Children who grow up in an orphanage often don't know what it means to be in a family, have a parent, or what it's like to be 'parented', so you want to be their friend, mentor, and/or cheerleader at first, and allow the relationship to grow. Parents who adopt a 12, 13, or 14-year-old child may never feel that they have a deep bond with their child. The bond you develop with your child might

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*Understand where your child is coming from— how does he know you'll provide for his needs?*

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feel different from a bond you develop with a younger child, and that's ok. They are not in the developmental phase of dependency that a younger child might be in, yet as their parents, we want them to now depend on us. They have learned to survive on their own and may have even been in a caretaker role with the younger children in the orphanage. Grief, loss, and fear of the unknown are very much a part of this adoption.

**Don't take it personally.** Many adopted children make a point of openly rejecting their new parents, or even humiliating them in public or around strangers. This can be especially true of children with their new mothers. Rejection can happen in the first few days, or even months down the line when you had thought you were making progress with bonding or have been having a peaceful time at home. When this happens, be calm and don't take it personally. Your child may be acting out how they were treated in the orphanage. They may be testing how much you are willing to put up with, or trying to show you that they can make it without you.

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### Rejection: Family Thoughts

*We adopted from Kaifeng SWI in November of 2009. Our daughter was 7 years old and her special need was her age. We found out later that Kaifeng runs a program that simulates the family structure with individual houses and a "mom" and "siblings." When we met Liza, she knew what it was like to be part of a family and she arrived with a photo album of her orphanage filled with pictures of her there and a bag of all her favorite snacks.*

*That's not to say that we didn't have difficulty. On our Gotcha Day, she humored us by looking at what we had brought for her then stood up, walked into a room filled with official looking Chinese people and shut the door. I panicked! What if they thought I couldn't control her?! As soon as the door opened, I grabbed her hand and held on tight. And I refused to let go, no*

*matter how hard she pulled. Immediately, she decided that she did not like me. And she ignored me from then on.*

*Luckily, she liked my husband and my son. My husband didn't want her to make a run for it so he played good cop. This was the right strategy... in hindsight. I wanted him to tell her to like me! I had done all the paperwork! I had convinced everyone that, in spite of having 5 children, we needed one more. She actually told both of our guides that she didn't like her Chinese mom and so, naturally, she didn't like me. She was never disruptive...she just let me know that I didn't register. Each night, I kissed her on the forehead and told her I loved her. Each night, she wiped it off and watched TV around me.*

*When we arrived home, it was near midnight and all of our kids were at the airport to greet us. Our daughters Cindy and Xia were 7 and 5 at the time and thrilled to have a new sister. Liza took about 10 minutes to check everybody out then joined hands with her sisters and skipped through the airport alongside them. We got home and they all piled into one bedroom, put on a Miley Cyrus CD and danced and sang for at least an hour in front of the mirrored doors. Even Liza sang!*

*I finally got them ready for bed and started to tuck them in. It was so nice to be able to kiss Cindy and Xia and tell them that I loved them, knowing that they would return the favor. I kissed Cindy, then Xia, and then Liza. It was the same process that had gone on night after night since we met her. A kiss on the forehead and then I told her I loved her. She looked me in the eye and, parroting her sisters, said, "I love you, Mom." And that was that.*

*Mom of Liza, adopted at age 7*

## Second Thoughts

You were really excited to meet your child, but after meeting him or her, it can be easy to second-guess your decision. **YOU** may not feel love or affection for this child right away, or you may experience a post adoption letdown as the reality of parenting this child sets in.

**Have realistic expectations.** Some parents may feel love for their child right away, but in most cases it takes time. You don't know this person you have just adopted – give yourself time to learn about them, and appreciate who they are. Love will come later.

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*You may not feel love or affection for this child right away.*

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**Work through it.** The old saying “fake it ‘til you make it” applies here. Show affection to your child, meet their needs, try to enjoy your time with them, and take it day by day. You are adding a completely new person to your family. It will take time for it to feel “normal.”

**Know who to talk to if you have serious concerns about your ability to parent your child.** In country, talk with your representative first. Talk to your spouse, family, or trusted friends who can help you evaluate whether you are experiencing “adoption jitters” or have more serious concerns. If you have concerns after returning home, call your agency and your social worker to help evaluate the situation and find support.

**Recognize the difference between a post adoption letdown, and post adoption depression.** It's normal to feel the letdown after looking forward to this day for so long or when reality sets in about the challenges of parenting your new child. However, seek help if you find yourself uninterested in being around others, having difficulty concentrating, constantly struggling with low energy unrelated to your activity level, or feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness, or hopelessness.

## Communication

Sure, you know your child will probably not speak any English. When it gets down to the nitty-gritty, though, how do you work with this child whom you don't understand and doesn't understand you?

**Plan ahead.** Research hand-held translation devices that are not dependent on an internet connection to help you communicate with your child. Look into adoption-related language books that you can take along with you to help smooth the language barrier. Figure out what works for you, and take it with you on your adoption trip. Try to learn some basic phrases ahead of time, if you can.

**Use your resources.** Your representative in country is a great resource to help you, and can help you communicate with your child in those first few weeks. Your agency may have several people available who can speak to your child on the phone once you are home and help translate to you what

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*Whenever possible, learn some simple phrases from your older adopted child and then teach her the English translation as an exchange.*

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they need. You can use Google translator or translation applications to help, but plan on translating short phrases or words rather than long sentences.

**Start developing sign language with your child.** This can be as complex as learning some sign language together, or making up signs that work well for both of you. Drawing pictures can be another effective way to overcome the language barrier.

**Use language as a bonding tool.** Many older kids love to teach. Whenever possible, learn some simple phrases from your older adopted child, and then teach her the English translation as an exchange. You may find your child becomes much more willing to learn when you let him teach first.



## Communication: Family Thoughts

Communication was very difficult and remains so six years later. She speaks and writes well but, in emotional situations, she often misunderstands both verbal and non-verbal cues. She still has an accent (which she denies, of course) that makes it difficult to understand what she is saying. Attachment and bonding were not as easy as with our older daughter (adopted as a toddler). Academically, she is fine and has made all A's for the past few years. She is in honors level classes. Education is something she strongly values and soaks in information and ideas like a sponge. We were shocked at how easily she adjusted to school. She did, however, benefit from participation in a topnotch ESL program offered through our district. There aren't so many struggles, anymore.

Mom of Ashley, adopted at age 10

In many ways, what I thought would be preparation wasn't important. I speak some Mandarin, but both the boys seemed to want to get to English as soon as possible. Mason refused to speak to anyone who spoke Cantonese to  

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*Both the boys seemed to want to get to English as soon as possible.*  

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him, either ignoring them or actually hiding from them. Our preparation came from already being parents, and from learning all we could about China, boys, children, discipline, and parenting in general. Adopted kids are way more like biological kids than they are different from them.

The language was much easier than we expected. Both times, within six weeks they were picking up enough to be able to get their wishes across. Even now they sometimes make mistakes in grammar, but within a year they were at their age level with basic language. It has been hard for me to separate what are adoption issues and what are gender differences in academic readiness,

affection sharing, aggression, and lots of other things. Jacob is somewhat dyslexic, so that challenges him in schoolwork. Homeschooling has been a good thing for them because they were not compared with peers until they were older.

Mom of Mason, adopted at age 6  
and Jacob, adopted at age 4

He understood “yes and no” but didn’t understand “why”. He knew that I kept getting upset if he walked around the van in the parking lot by himself or unbuckled his car seat in the middle of the highway, but he didn’t understand why. I showed him a You Tube video on crash dummies. Safety concerns were our biggest challenge to explain. After six months at home, he is fluent enough for conversation about daily activities.

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*Safety concerns were our biggest challenge to explain.*

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We used flash cards, watched educational PBS shows, and I-pad apps (search Chinese language/matching/flash cards) to help reinforce language. The best thing is having 5 siblings and going to ESL. Language acquisition has been far easier than I expected but it looks like he is really a bright child.

Consider having someone translate if your child is having surgery. We skyped with our Chinese school teacher so that he would understand why he couldn't eat before surgery and that it wasn't any sort of punishment.

After about five months home, I had him count in Chinese and he had lost most of it. He lost his Chinese in about 4 months. It's truly been amazing and fascinating to watch his language transformation. Although, he acts like he doesn't understand you if it will benefit him (our exchange student did the same thing).

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

*The language piece has been interesting. We weren't expecting such a struggle with writing and reading because her spoken English came so fast. She's in 6th grade and is a great student, but in reading and writing she is really much more of a second grader. She sees a tutor and has since we got home.*

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*We weren't expecting such a struggle with writing and reading because her oral English came so fast.*

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*We're lucky because she loves school and is a teacher pleaser. We also didn't expect that she would want to TOTALLY give up any Mandarin she knew. She hates speaking it and really ignores our pleas to keep it for the future. It may be hormonal, but she really struggles with the Chinese/American thing - which one is she? Why didn't anyone ask her if she wanted to come? Can she ever go back? What will her kids be? Why is English so hard?*

Mom of Lexie, adopted at age 10

## Special Considerations for the Preteen Child

While adopting a child at any age can be a challenge, there are additional challenges that come from adopting a child over the age of 10. These preteen children come from many different backgrounds. Some of them may have spent all their time with one foster family or one orphanage, others may bounce between foster families and orphanages every few years, still others may have been adopted domestically and then given up once again to the orphanage. The result of these many different experiences is that adopted preteens have widely varied views on family life—and expectations about joining a new family.

Preteens may have no experience with a family at all, or may have vivid memories of several families, all of whom decided not to keep them. The background experiences of your child may not be disclosed to you by the orphanage prior to the adoption, and may

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*Think before you commit to adopting a preteen-aged child.*

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surface later as the child becomes more comfortable talking about their life.

**Be aware of what your child might expect.** While every child's experience is unique, there are a couple common expectations heard from preteen children that adoptive parents don't expect. The first is that the child expects to someday return to their home country. Well-meaning foster parents and orphanage workers may encourage the child to accept an international adoption that the child is not interested in under the pretense that they are going to the U.S. for an education and to seek a future not available to them in their home country. These children may believe that once they have completed their education, they can return 'home'.

The second common expectation heard from preteen children is that they were told by peers that their lives might be at risk if they accepted an international

adoption placement. For example, several children were told that they were being adopted to be harvested for organs, or to provide organs for an ailing adoptive sibling. Although this sounds absurd to many parents, the children in orphanages have no frame of reference to know if this is true, and may spend months watching for signs of illness of siblings and being wary of visiting the doctor.

**Expect your child to be unprepared for the reality of adoption.** In the best case scenario, your child only has an idea of what life with you will be like. Even with the best preparation prior to adoption, your child needs experience to know that it is true. Many children are adopted with little or no preparation of what to expect, so plan for them to learn as they go.

**Think before you commit to adopting a preteen-aged child.** How will you feel if you are never truly considered to be 'mom' or 'dad' by this child? Your role may be more that of a mentor or guide to the older child, especially for the first year or two. Are you open to an adoption that is more 'open' than the traditional international adoption? Preteens have connections to their lives before adoption in ways younger children don't. They know who their caregivers were, and may have relationships with them that they hope to continue. Some children may have foster parents that they are close to that they plan to keep in contact with. In the first year of adoption, your child may crave contact with previous caregivers as a support system while they adjust to life in your home. Spend some time considering the different possibilities with an older child, and know how you feel about these possibilities. Adopting a preteen child can be a great undertaking, and it's not for everyone. Be realistic about what is possible for you and your family.

**Once the child is in your home, be patient.** It takes a long time to foster trust in your child and to nurture attachment, and the process will look very different from a child who joins the family at a younger age. Your child needs to feel

comfortable, cared for, and to know that they are safe with you before you can start working with them on any other skills.

**Stick in there!** Many attachment specialists agree that it takes the same amount of time your child spent without you for healthy attachment to develop. For a child adopted at age 10, that means your child will not be through the attachment process for at least 10 years! In addition, your child may play the 'wait-and-see' game until they have been in your home longer than their longest previous placement. If they were in a foster home before for three years, they may wait until they've made it past that benchmark with your family before they truly start feeling your family might be 'forever'. The idiom 'experience is the best teacher' works both against and for you in this— your child has experienced countless times being unwanted and abandoned, but can experience just as many times being loved and cared for once they are in your home.

## First Days: Family Thoughts

Meeting our two boys was awkward. We came armed with electronics, translator via computer, and games that we could play without much conversation, like UNO. We spent lots of time side by side playing ping pong, swimming, watching TV things that they wanted to do, as well as allowing them to choose where and what we ate. Our 13 year old son was well prepared in the sense that he had English in school. Our 12 year old son did not expect to be adopted due to his special need so he was unprepared, scared, and immature in many ways. If possible we would recommend adopting two together. If not, bring a sibling or relative around the same age so they have someone to connect with.

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*Meeting our two boys was awkward.*

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Mom of Timothy, adopted at age 13,  
and Abe, adopted at age 12

Our first meeting was not what we had expected. We got separated and I (Mom) ended up on the wrong floor with another family. By the time I got to the right room, Wayne was already hanging out with Dad, so I did not get to see any of Wayne's initial reaction to us. Wayne was open to us. He was a scavenger right from the start and helped himself to a snack from the bag of another family. They were great sports about it, just laughed and offered him more.

I was under the impression that Wayne was well-prepared for us. When we could finally speak to him, he revealed that he remembered other families coming to the orphanage and giving candy to the kids. He wanted to return to China to do that.

*We did not have much to do in the province, so we spent lots of time trying to handle an active boy in the nearby park and hotel room. He really loved an older girl being adopted by another family and spent a lot of time with her. My impression of that was that older children should be adopted in pairs.*

*Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6*

*Our group was small with only one other family adopting a 2 yr old boy. Both boys came into the room with nannies and the orphanage director. John seemed well prepared saying, "Hello, Mommy. How are you?" In English! I'm not sure he knew what he was saying, but I could understand what he said. He was dressed in an ill-fitting suit and what he brought with him were a few items we had sent to him. We were presented with a thick memories book with photos and drawings, some by caretakers and others by John, along with handwritten notes dating back to age two. John had spent his entire life in this orphanage, Wu Zhou, since one month old and from what I could tell, this was a very good one with plenty of food and a Half the Sky school. He had been learning to write in Chinese and had drawn lots of pictures for us. He had obviously been very well taken care of! His nanny quietly slipped out of the room along with the others from the orphanage and he was very upset when he realized this. It was a rough four or so hours (for all involved) until he quieted down, but when he did, he was happy and smiling from ear to ear. That evening and the next morning, he held my hand, tried and succeeded in communicating with me in a variety of ways. Since he was older, he was able to understand what was happening and could find ways to tell me something without having the language. He was a resilient happy child from day one. The day after we met, we again saw his nanny and director to finalize the transition. I was really worried he would get upset leaving his nanny again, but not a tear. She obviously cared deeply for John as when she said good-bye, she was crying. John said good-bye and continued playing. Amazing! Over the next*



week and a half, we got to know each other in Nanning and then in Guangzhou. John talked, as much as possible, to my husband on the phone, grinning the entire time. John wanted to learn English and asked me what everything was called, then repeated it. He was extremely easy going, cooperative and genuinely happy. He even made his bed and mine the first day while I was in the shower! He couldn't wait to show me. The plane trip back was a breeze and he ran to his Baba arms wide open the second he saw him at the airport.

Mom of John, adopted at age 6

The toughest aspect of adopting an older child is realizing that sometimes, the child does not want to be adopted. We thought we were giving a kid that

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*The toughest aspect of adopting an older child is realizing that sometimes, the child does not want to be adopted.*

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no one else wanted a chance but she was not willing to give us one. This adoption was incredibly difficult and stressful; my husband and I nearly ended up divorced because of the stress and issues she brought into our family. You can't make a child love you or even like you. Our daughter repeatedly and consciously

made the choice to not be a part of our family or talk to me. Many, many people counseled her and she chose to not follow their advice.

Mom of Avalon, adopted at age 12

## Section 2

### Meeting Basic Needs



You have probably been well prepared for what it takes to parent a child, either from previous experience, classes, or learning from those around you. In some ways, adopting an older child has its perks— you've avoided the diaper and bottle- feeding stage, and are hoping to adopt a child who has already learned basic self-care. However, adopting a child reared in an orphanage can have unique challenges as far as meeting your child's basic needs. For these topics, **preparation and patience** are key.



## Sleep

Sleep can be a problem for all adopted children, not just infants. Your child may be 6 or 10 years old, but at night suddenly act around like a newborn, needing constant attention. Your child may also wake up in the middle of the night and wander the house, or have other difficulties.

**Explain the time difference.** Enlist the help of your in country rep before you leave to help explain to your child that there will be a significant time difference once you return home, and what that might mean for them. Their age may impact how much they understand, but having a little warning might help. Keep in mind the difference when you do arrive home, and be prepared to allow at least a couple of weeks for your child's internal clock to reset.

**Treat them as the age they are acting like at the time.** Trauma, stress, and transitions can all impact your child's ability to feel safe sleeping in a new place with new people. If your child wakes up every hour and needs comfort to go back to sleep, provide it. If your child won't sleep in their own room, consider allowing them to share a room with you or a sibling who they trust. Just like a newborn, your child is learning to trust you and depend on you to provide for their needs. Meet their needs as though they were a newborn, and allow that trust to build.

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*Trauma, stress, and transitions can all impact your child's ability to feel safe sleeping in a new place with new people.*

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**Think about both safety and trust.** Your child wandering around the house while everyone else sleeps may not be safe, but it is also detrimental to their trust in you to protect them by locking them in their room or restricting their access to you. Be creative. Find a way for them to have access to you, but also to protect their safety. Try to understand their need – whether it is boredom, trouble sleeping, or feeling insecure in a large room all to themselves, and try to

meet that need. You might set up a “baby monitor” in the room so that you can hear if they are having trouble during the night.

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## **Sleep: Family Thoughts**

*Jet lag was our initial struggle at home. Wayne stayed up the entire first night. Our older children stayed up with him and kept him under control. Once we got past the jet lag, we had to work through a few family dynamics. It was summer, so we had several weeks before starting school.*

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

*In China, our son was able to fall asleep ‘dead to the world’ within moments of his head hitting the pillow. We weren’t sure if he was emotionally exhausted from the getting to know us or the transition to our family, or if this was a typical sleeping style. We also expected that he would experience changes when we got home, if only because of the time change. What we learned within a week or two of coming home was that wasn’t able to fall asleep or stay asleep, and this seemed to be partly related to his anxiety of being in his new home with so many changes. It took several months before he was able to comfortably fall asleep in his own room.*

Mom of Bryan, adopted at age 7

*We really struggled with our daughter once at home. She would stay awake long after we were ready to sleep, or would wake up later and wander the house. We were worried for her safety and chose to put an alarm on her door so we would hear if she left her room so that we could go to her and help her get what she needed. We had heard of families using baby monitors in the bedroom of their children, but we didn’t feel like we needed to do that. We set up a mat in our bedroom where she could come to sleep if she had a hard time*

*in her room. Once she began sleeping better and was more relaxed, we took the alarm off but put a little bell on her door so we could still hear- but we have been working on teaching her to come and get us if she has trouble sleeping instead of wandering the halls.*

Mother of Jennifer, adopted at 10.

## Food

Food and eating are huge factors for institutionalized children. They may have never had enough to eat, and likely have never had control over what they chose to eat or when. Food will probably be your child's largest fear, and also your best chance to develop trust early to start the process of bonding.

**Provide food, and plenty of it.** Allow your child to eat as much as they want, keeping an eye on them to make sure they don't get sick. If it seems they will eat until they throw up, stop them, but help them understand more will be available.

**Have food available at any time.** Give your child a backpack with granola bars or other healthy, non-perishable snacks to carry around. Make sure they know the stash belongs only to them, and will not be taken away. Replace snacks when they are eaten. Provide a basket in their room, shelf in the kitchen, or other places where your child knows they will always find food that they are welcome to. Understand they will most likely still hoard food and hide it under the bed, in the desk, or in the dresser, and be patient with this behavior. At mealtime, in addition to whatever is being served, consider having something available that your child can eat in unlimited amounts, such as salad or fruit. This way, your child has the option of eating as much as they like, and you will still be comfortable with the quality of the food they are eating.

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*Food is the way to an orphan's heart.*

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**Plan ahead for food preferences.** Your child may hate American food and only want noodles. Find out while in country, if you can, what your child likes to eat, and see if you can bring any back with you. Find a way to provide foods that your child enjoys at home by finding a local Asian market, restaurant, or cookbook that will help you provide things they like. Food is comforting, and

having familiar and enjoyed foods will help your child feel safe and comfortable.

**NEVER use food (or lack thereof) as a punishment.**

### Food: Family Thoughts

*Food is the way to an orphan's heart. Pick up some favorite snacks while in the country and make sure to keep snacks available at all times. If you have a market where you can get food from the original country, go often.*

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

*Food is a big adjustment. We purchased Chinese take-out and cooked at home with a Chinese cookbook. We slowly introduced new foods. We didn't want to shock her digestive system. The first month is the most difficult with all the adjustments in food, culture, language and family. We introduced her to our numerous family and friends. We didn't do it little by little, although, I did instruct everyone to say hi and not to smother her. It worked out fine. She was a social butterfly in gatherings and I let her explore her surroundings without anyone bothering her with too much curiosity.*

*Chloe feels great at home. I showed her around the house and the location of everything in the kitchen. I had to emphasize that it is her house and that she can eat anything in the kitchen. I didn't have problems with her eating everything in sight. She did this in China. After 2 weeks, she figured out that there was always going to be a lot of food and slowed down on her eating. She has a very good appetite but she felt shy to get the food herself at home.*

Mom of Chloe, adopted at age 11



He did hoard some. We would find food behind his bed or hidden in closets, but this was really a minor thing. He figured out pretty quickly that we weren't going to limit his food. The funniest food thing was when he put an open ice cream bar in a backpack to save for later. Poor thing, he was shocked when I removed it and threw it away.

Mom of Wynn, adopted at age 6

In the beginning few weeks I would find food hidden in places. One night I went to tuck him in and when I moved the comforter two oranges came rolling out. I would find squished hard-boiled eggs in his backpack. I read about this and heard about that in the adoption classes. I decided to give him three places in his room where he could put his things. I had his tutor tell him that these places were his and his alone. He loved it. I would go through it every few days to look for food and when they got too over-run with things I would pick up some toys and put them back to where they belonged. He did not mind, or notice, the invasion and it worked out well. They only lasted a few months since he had the control. I will still find some things that he has taken from his siblings and put under his bed sometimes but he functions well in our house with the spaces we have defined for each child and with common toys.

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*I would find food hidden in places. One night I went to tuck him in and when I moved the comforter two oranges came rolling out.*

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Mom of Jonah, adopted at age 5

## Hygiene

Cultural, economic, and institutional factors can make expectations around hygiene confusing for parents and children alike. Regular bathing is not common in an orphanage. Your child may have only showered weekly, completely clothed, with other children. They may not have learned to properly brush their teeth, and may not know how to care for their things. In the first few days after adoption, your child may not want to take off their clothes, even if the clothes are very dirty. They may not want to bathe or shower, even if they are a bit “smelly”. You may come to find your child is very resistant to taking a shower, to brushing their teeth, to washing their hands, to changing their clothes daily, etc. These poor hygiene habits are a result of lack of experience and training in personal hygiene, lack of adult supervision, limited choice of clothing, or being trained not to waste water. Whether in country or home, patience and understanding are needed.

**Don't make it a big issue.** Find out what habits your child already has, and work with those to help educate them on how to stay healthy. Don't introduce everything at once, but rather pick one thing to introduce to them every few weeks, and be prepared for it to take a long time for them to learn and feel comfortable with new habits. Expect it to take months (or even years!) before your child will voluntarily bathe or brush their teeth daily.

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*Explain your expectations, trying to keep them reasonable for your child, and then allow your child to make decisions that allow him to feel comfortable.*

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**Give your child the control.** Explain your expectations, trying to keep them reasonable for your child, and then allow your child to make decisions that allow him to feel comfortable. For example, you expect your child to take a shower every other day, but allow her to choose when to shower. This is another

great time to pick your battles. The first couple of weeks after adoption, when everything else is new and confusing may not be a great time to make an issue of hygiene.

**Wait for them to figure it out.** All kids want and need friends, so they learn quickly. By being with other kids, classmates, and siblings, they will quickly figure out ways to conform and to be accepted and fit in.

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### Hygiene: Family Thoughts

*She had HUGE dental issues, some of which came to a head in China. Many, many bad teeth pulled and root canals later, she is great, but we didn't even consider this aspect of her health.*

Mom of Ashley, adopted at age 10

*I think he would have said "thank you" to me for not rushing him back to the hotel and stripping him down naked to give him a bath once we received him. Even though I got hugs and kisses right away, I still think by letting him play with his new toys and then getting him something to eat first allowed him to relax. I also brought bathtub toys and let him see me run the tub and letting him put the toys in it first before I got him undressed was key. I showed him his new pj's for after his bath and this helped too. He knew I was going to get him dressed in something fun. Trust me, he was so dirty and a little smelly I wanted him to bathe right away. He had three layers of hot clothing on and each layer was equally soiled. Since he was older, I still think this was the right thing to do, it allowed him some dignity. Kissing the top of a dirty head for a few hours was not going to kill me. I know it would be what I would want if the roles were reversed.*

Mom of Terry, adopted at age 5

## Sensory Overload

It's easy to be excited for your child about all the new things you can expose them to – their own room, the grocery store, an amusement park, meeting extended family and friends. However, this can be too much for your child.

**Walk in their shoes.** Think about what it must be like for your child to go from an orphanage with no space, belongings, or clothing of their own to a home with their own room, toys, and clothes to care for. Your child may be overwhelmed by the thought. Your child may also become easily overwhelmed on outings to the store, amusement parks, or other places. Try to see things through their eyes so that you can be prepared and sensitive to their ability to cope with so many changes.

**Plan ahead.** If you know you will be taking your child to a new environment, give them some advance warning on what it might be like. Plan for short visits at first, and allow your child the chance to adapt. Watch for signs

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*If you know you will be taking your child to a new environment, give them advance warning on what it will be like.*

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that your child is overwhelmed, and know when to leave to allow your child the space she needs. Signs of being overwhelmed may include hyperactivity, falling easily, making frequent trips to the restroom, constant need for food or drink, complaints of being too hot or too cold, acting 'jittery' or nervous, or having difficulty remembering what just happened or where they just visited.

**Limit new experiences.** Especially when you have first arrived home, it is usually a good idea to limit outings and meeting new people to what your child can handle. You will have to gauge your child's reactions to determine what is too much.

**Watch for sensory integration problems.** All children, not just older adoptees, who come from a sterile environment, with limited opportunities to learn, combined with a history of trauma or abuse and poor nutrition, are at risk for

sensory integration problems. Sensory integration is the ability for the brain to process sensory information. Children with problems with sensory integration can be highly stressed by sensory stimuli, such as busily patterned wallpaper, loud noises, or certain textures of food or clothing. If your child shows signs of anxiety, or even aggression, when faced with certain types of stimuli, take note, and plan to discuss sensory integration problems with your physician or an occupational therapist.

### **Sensory Overload: Family Thoughts**

*The kids took to Wayne right away, and he did fine with them. He was exposed to so many new things, and many of them scared him. He clung to me in even the shallow part of the swimming pool. A swaying ramp on a playground had him hanging on for dear life. He struggled with the difference between personal and family property, so our other kids often found their personal belongings in his possession.*

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

*If you can expose your new child to fewer toys at first, it might be less overwhelming.*

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

*When we came home with our son, he was having a very difficult time sleeping, even well after jet lag wore off. We began to wonder if our house was too quiet for him. We changed his room so that he could have a low light on as well as some quiet music on while he went to bed. Within a week or two, he was sleeping well through the night with very few problems.*

Mom of Barry, adopted at age 10

## Section 3 Relationships



You've made it home, survived your first few weeks, and are equipped to help meet your child's needs. Now, how do you integrate this child into your family, home, school, and community? As with everything else, this is a process. Some families experience a quick bond with their child, and are off and running within a month or two. For others, the process takes longer, even several years, and has periodic setbacks. Some families believe all they need is love, and everything will come together. Love does help, but the reality is parents can struggle whether or not they feel love for their child. Having **an open mind and a willingness to "stick with it"** are likely to be your best traits for this stage of the adoption. Be prepared to be surprised every day, and ready to fight through and persevere during the moments of frustration, annoyance, or other difficulties that can happen along the way.



## Preparing for Family Life

Virtually no family goes into an adoption without the knowledge that the family dynamics will change once a new child enters the home. However, many families feel at a loss as to how to plan for those changes. Whether this adoption will result in your first child or an addition to children already in the home, adequate preparation can help the transition to be smooth.

**Educate your family.** Reading this booklet, delving deeper into other available resources, and talking to families who have been through the adoption of an older child can help provide clues as to how your life might look after the adoption. Don't keep that information to yourself! Talk to your spouse, children,

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*Educate yourself about adopting an older child, and share that information with your whole family!*

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and outside family members about the challenges you may face when your new child comes home. Talking about what background your child comes from, what they might struggle with, and what moving across the world to live with strangers might feel like can

help everyone to be prepared and not be surprised when the old 'normal' life at home is disrupted.

**Keep the topic of your adoption open with your children at home.** Young children, under the age of 4, will likely not understand much about adoption or what life will be like when the adoption is complete. However, talking about it around them, talking to them in an age-appropriate way, or even reading children's books about adoption will help them be as prepared as possible. For older children in the home, spend some time talking about what changes might be coming. Share with them that an older adopted child will probably have different needs than the children already in the home, and may take more time and attention than expected. Help your children to understand what it would be like in an orphanage, what trauma might be, and how those things may



affect your adopted child. Having some basic sympathy for the new child may help (even if only a little!) your existing children during difficult days ahead.

**Adjust your family schedule to allow for time with the existing family members.**

Your life will be changing once you arrive home with a new child—he may not seamlessly fit into the family life you have set up. Also, it's good to remember that adding a child who may have extra needs for attention or time may impact your time for other things and people in your home. If possible, plan to take time off of work for the first few weeks after arriving home, and plan to have some time available to take off during the months ahead. Talk with your family before the adoption to decide what will work best to make sure existing children (and spouses!) have the time and attention they need. Some families find that staggering bedtimes helps, by allowing a little extra time for each child at the end of the day. Others take children out of school for an hour or so for lunch or a special family outing. Protecting this time for your family can help ease tensions and stress that builds with the challenges of a new adopted child in the home.

**Build a safety plan.** Prepare for the worst case scenario. If your adopted child struggles with temper tantrums, sexual abuse trauma, or disrespect for belongings, you will feel more secure if you know everything is in place to protect your existing children and belongings. Set up a special place for your children to store those things or toys that are

very special to them so that they won't be broken or handled in the initial days that an adopted child may not understand personal

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*Prepare for the worst case scenario.*

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boundaries. Talk to your kids about safety, and recognizing when another child's behavior is inappropriate or dangerous, reminding them of your household rules, and make sure they know to talk to an adult if they don't feel safe. Set a safe spot and code word for your children so that if the adopted child's behavior is threatening or needs extra adult attention, your children know

to leave the area and go to their safe spot. The hope is that your adopted child will be a best case scenario and not need these extra precautions, but having them in place will build security for the family.

**Think about changes to birth order.** Adopting an older child may change the birth order in your family. Some families handle this well, others do not. Be prepared for what the change will be for your children, and recognize the struggles this may cause. If your oldest child will no longer be the oldest, be prepared for the loss this may cause her. Children who have been moved in birth order respond in different ways, most meant to garner more attention and reassurance from their parents that their place in the family has not changed. Also prepare for the changes of birth order based on the maturity of your adopted child. Many older adoptees have inconsistent development, with lower maturity emotionally, socially, and academically. This can be unnerving for existing children who plan to look up to their new older brother, but instead find him acting as though he were a toddler or young child at times.

**Expect grief about the changes in the family.** Parents and children alike lose something in adoption, even as they gain a new child in the family. Time with your children or spouse, changes to the relationship, and differences in day-to-day activities are all expected. Grieving those losses is also normal, and should be expected and shared with one another. Spend some time reading about normal grief and loss in adoption, especially in children. Develop a way for your family to accept and grow from their grief. Most importantly, validate your family's pain and questions about this adoption process, and validate your own feelings! More information about grieving can be found in our grief and loss section.

## Bonding and Attachment

Children are designed to attach to their caregivers. In a perfect world, an infant bonds with his caregiver from birth, by experiencing his needs being met consistently and lovingly. A relationship develops, and the child learns to trust not only the caregiver, but also those around him. Adopted children, even from the best settings, have not had this experience. Even the best orphanages have a delayed response to meeting the needs of children, and may not provide consistent care. This means your child has a range of experiences with attachment and bonding, and you will not only be working on developing that bond with your child, but also healing past negative experiences, or even traumas in some cases.

**Have empathy for your child.** Understanding the challenging places your child has been before coming to your home may help you respond more lovingly and patiently if it seems your child is resisting bonding with you. How many caregivers have come and gone so far in your child's life? How many were kind and loving? Even if you don't know your child's complete story, keeping in mind the possibilities may give you a better perspective on the struggles your child is

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*Whether you are playing or disciplining, show love and acceptance to your child at all times.*

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experiencing. Some older children have even been adopted before and later returned to the orphanage. You may have to outlast their longest previous caregiver and speak words of love and acceptance constantly before they will believe you are 'forever'.

**Be consistent.** Providing for their needs, as previously discussed in other sections, is a great place to start. However, also be consistent in how you treat your child. Whether you are playing or disciplining, show love and acceptance to your child at all times. Be available to them at any time, and make bonding an everyday activity, not one that happens at certain scheduled times.

**Do activities together rather than ask your child to do them alone.** For example, rather than ask your child to clean her room, suggest you can clean it together. This change will have two effects. It will help your child learn how to do day-to-day tasks in the way you would like them done, and it emphasizes the relationship. Your child will understand that your home is not just another setting where they are on their own and are bossed around by those who are older, but a family where tasks are taken on together. These can be great opportunities to spend time together that isn't as intense as a one-on-one talk, and so can be less emotionally challenging for children.

**Set aside some special bonding time.** Set aside 15 or 20 minutes to spend just with your child in an activity that they enjoy. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by phone calls, chores, or other responsibilities during this time, but focus solely on your child. For the younger group (5-8), this may be special play time where you play whatever your child chooses. For the older group, this might be time you get outside to play catch, take a hike, or do another activity they enjoy. The main goal is to have time that is uninterrupted, and directed by your child.

**Eat together.** Eating meals as a family is becoming more and more rare, and yet is a great opportunity to bond with your kids. Cooking together can also be a great opportunity for children who are old enough to help out. For children who have not had enough to eat in the past, this can be a struggle or a great time of bonding. If your child is coping with significant amounts of hoarding food or overeating, eating as a family can help set norms about food in your family. However, if eating is difficult for your child, don't make too big of a deal out of it.

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*Attachment isn't all or nothing.*

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**Be silly and have fun!** Bonding doesn't just happen at scheduled times and isn't necessarily something that has to be worked at. If you can have fun with your child and enjoy each other, you can strengthen your relationship.

**Remember, attachment isn't all or nothing.** Some parents are paralyzed by the fear of 'reactive attachment disorder' and feel if their child isn't completely attached to their family within a few months, then something must be seriously wrong. There are all kinds of attachment, and even well-attached biological children occasionally have behaviors that may look concerning. Attachment is a process, and not one that is necessarily always moving forward. Be prepared for setbacks, times when your child seems to be bonding well with you, followed by times of testing. If your child has frequent, severe, and consistent problematic behaviors that seem to stem from attachment difficulties, then seek the help of a professional. Even if your child is diagnosed with an attachment disorder, don't let that label get you down. Continue to focus on what your child is struggling with, and work on helping them in those areas, rather than trying to tackle attachment as a whole.

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### **Bonding and Attachment: Family Thoughts**

*Blending into the family was easier than expected. Although having bio and other adopted kids who are willing to open their arms to new siblings made it so much easier than it could have been otherwise. We did not expect these kids to love and bond to us so fast.*

Mom of Timothy, adopted at age 13,  
and Abe, adopted at age 12

*Cassie has a hard time calling me "Mom" and my husband "Papi". She is coming around. Adopted children do not want to get hurt again and it takes time for them to bond with their new parents. She does not like to kiss or hug people. She is also learning how to feel comfortable doing this. In Miami, everyone greets you with a kiss. She is slowly learning to be affectionate. She*

loves us a lot and her way of showing it is that she will place her head on our shoulder. This is good enough for me. I love it.

Mom of Cassie, adopted at age 11

Put pictures of your new child up around your home as soon as possible. Our son was very anxious for us to have his pictures in frames along with our other kids.

Mom of Wynn, adopted at age 6

One thing that I have to say was very impactful to Jackson was something my neighbor did for him while we were gone. I would send pictures and blog

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*My neighbor took a picture [from our blog while in China] of our family together, and framed it, leaving it on our kitchen table for Jackson to see when he came home.*

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while I was in China. My neighbor took a picture of our family together from our blog and framed it, leaving it on our kitchen table for Jackson to see when he came home. She also printed a picture of all 3 kids and framed it and placed in on our end table in our bedroom. I found Jackson going back to that picture twice in his exploration. He picked it

up two times and smiled and put it down. It was clearly our room and it was clear it was a picture of our children. I did put a picture of him from China in his room before we left, but the pictures of us all together were more impactful.

Mom of Jackson, adopted at age 6

## Socialization

Your child may have never been outside the institution, or may not have had many experiences other than their limited experience in the orphanage. This means a large number of experiences your child has not had, and does not know how to handle.

**Explain, explain, explain.** No matter what the age of your child, be prepared to explain everything to them as you would a toddler. The stove is hot. This is how you wipe your bottom. Close the refrigerator door. Don't eat food off the floor. Expect that your child has had no experience with anything in your world, and adjust accordingly once you know your child better. It's much easier to explain less once you know what they know than to deal with an accident or injury because you assumed they understood.

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*Expect that your child has no experience with anything in your world, and adjust accordingly once you know your child better.*

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**Keep them in sight!** For kids who have never left the orphanage, the world is a big, exciting, scary place. They may not understand not to wander off. Hold their hand if they will allow it, and keep them as close as possible.

**"Baby-proof" your house, even for your 11-year-old.** Even the most street-smart kids may have no experience with the things in your house. For a child who can't read English, many medications may look like candy, and they might not know how to handle your household cleaners. Protect both of you by keeping unsafe items out of sight until you know your child better.

**Be cautious about physical contact until you know your child's preference.** Cultural norms may dictate what your child is comfortable with. For example, Chinese people do not often show their affection with kisses or hugs, so your child may not like to be kissed or hugged. Due to severe lack of personal attention and loving touch in the orphanage, some children just can't get

enough kisses and hugs, while others don't know how to handle physical affection. You will need to help them understand your boundaries, and what constitutes appropriate touch for your family, while respecting and honoring their personal space. Discover ways to show affection that is acceptable for both of you. For example, a Korean adoptee (adopted at age 7) remembers that while she was comfortable with affection with her mom, it was much more difficult with her dad. For the first year of the adoption, her parents would come to kiss her goodnight. Her mom would kiss her head, and her dad would kiss the doll she slept with. This was as much physical contact as she could handle for the first year being at home. As she became more comfortable, they were able to change what affection looked like for their family.

**“Excuse me?”** Many families get frustrated with their child's refusal or inability to use good manners or say the expected polite phrases. Relax. Adopted children haven't been taught to say “I'm sorry”, and aren't used to apologizing or thanking others. They just need some time to learn new manners and habits.

**Educate your child about those in your family and social circle.** Explain to your child the difference between parents and other adults, family members and other friends. Don't be surprised that he or she may not know the difference between your sister and your mother. Give plenty of time for your child to learn the different faces and names, and be patient as they learn. Help your child out by letting them know if you expect a visitor, and remind them how you are related.

**Prepare for problems of stealing or misunderstanding about possessions.** The meaning and consequences of stealing is socialized in children early on when raised with a biological family. However, in an orphanage these rules may not be taught, and may even be somewhat encouraged as children compete for community resources. Adopted children might not have a sense of objects 'belonging' to one person or another, but rather believe everything is available to everyone. This is true of things in the home, at school, or at the store— they



may have never noticed an association between selecting items at the store and paying at the counter. In addition, children may steal from those closest to them (mom, siblings, and friends) as a sign of their control. When stealing happens, explain the rules and expectations to your child, and continue to be patient as they learn yet another new expectation. Avoid giving stealing behaviors too much attention— if your child simply doesn't understand, they will be humiliated, and if they are trying to control you or the situation, attention will only encourage the behavior in the future.

### Socialization: Family Thoughts

*Probably the hardest aspect has been the immaturity of our younger adopted son. He came home at age 12 but has the maturity of an 8-year-old.*

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*The hardest aspect has been the immaturity of our younger adopted son.*

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*We assume it has a lot to do with the traumatic event that he dealt with when being abandoned at age 6. His personality is happy go lucky and not serious in any way, which adds to the immature responses we get.*

*Dealing with one mature 13-year-old child and one immature 12-year-old child, and having appropriate expectations for each has been difficult. We had to reevaluate our responses to him initially but have slowly begun to hold him accountable for his age. We still occasionally deal with the older child trying to parent our younger kids as this was expected of them in their orphanage, and as a response to the immaturity of our younger son. The reality is the things we have dealt with are all possible teenage/kid behaviors that you could have with biological kids.*

Mom of Timothy, adopted at age 13 and  
Abe, adopted at age 12

*You will have to re-teach your older child EVERYTHING the American way and your family's way. For example, we had to teach Miles how to use the toilet. Yes, he may be potty trained, but does everything else differently. After 7 months of adoption, we are still having issues.*

*Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6*

*The toughest challenge was religion. It was hard to find a church that knew what to do with someone who spoke Chinese only. We are Catholic and we found a priest and a nun that have been so helpful. I wanted for Chloe to start early with her religious education. It must be tough when you wait until they are teenagers. Chloe attended an English CCD Class until Sister Cathy figured out that she didn't understand too much. She contacted the Archdiocese of Miami and they referred us to a Chinese priest. Chloe now has a CCD teacher, born in Macau, which teaches her the faith in Cantonese and English. Chloe has developed both spiritually and emotionally with her. The teacher is very spiritual, strict in a very gentle way (tough love she calls it) and has been a blessing. Chloe did not speak at all in China when we picked her up and when she came to the United States. In China, she did not speak after she was abandoned at the age of 6. It took time for her to speak again. She loses her voice when she is stressed. With the help of her teacher, she is a chatter box. We do have to drive 1 hour to go to Chinese Mass but it is worth it. After Mass, we have a potluck lunch with all sorts of Chinese dishes. We have formed a tight bond with our new Chinese family at St. Jerome Catholic Church. I do recommend that whatever religion you practice, you try to find the Chinese group. Ours is called the Chinese Apostolate group. It will help your child feel welcomed into his new faith.*

*Mom of Chloe, adopted at age 11*

## School

Families often wonder what to do about starting school for their older adoptive child. Some children have had some exposure to school while living in China and some may have had very little. Ask your child what they think about school and what their experiences with school were in China. You may find out that your child is looking forward to meeting other children and being at school.

**Visit with your child's school in advance of the adoption.** Ask if there is good ESL (English as a Second Language) support and if they have ever worked with a child recently adopted from another country. Look into options for extra services if your child comes home with unknown school needs that you might not have been prepared for.

**Think about when you want them to start school.** There is no hard and fast rule about when to begin school but for those children who are seeking peer interaction, you may want to get them enrolled in school within a few weeks once they have adjusted to the jet lag and behaviorally appear to be ready to take this step. Some parents chose to do home schooling, especially if other children in the home are home schooled. Other families will provide some level of home schooling until their child appears to be emotionally ready to enter a more formal school setting. Another option may be to begin with a public school setting and then explore other options, if needed- maybe a smaller private setting or one that can be more individualized to meet their child's learning needs. Remember to work with your child's potential teacher to prepare for your child's past experience in the orphanage and at school so they are aware of your child's unique educational/behavioral needs. If you plan to use the public school option, prepare your child (perhaps using a

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*You may find out that your child is looking forward to meeting other children and being at school.*

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translator) for how the school system works. Be sure they understand that you are not leaving them at what they perceive as another orphanage, and assure them that you will be back every day to pick them up. One family found out that their 11-year-old daughter had not attended any formal schooling in China. They sought out a Montessori school for her to help her meet her very specific educational needs. Prepare a plan for school prior to your adoption but be flexible to adjust and modify once you learn what your child's needs and readiness for school.

**Be prepared for setbacks.** Some children reject the idea of going to school or refuse to go back after a few days of enrollment. This is mainly because of their lack of knowledge or experience with the school environment in this country, and because of their inability to understand or communicate with anyone. Adopted children may struggle with self-esteem, confidence, and loneliness at school. Private English tutoring or small ELA (English Language Acquisition) groups may help. Also, you may want to accompany your child for the first few days of school to help him or her get settled and become more familiar with the routine. Remember, fundamentally, kids love to be with other kids. Usually in no time your child will learn to enjoy friends of same age and have fun with intellectual challenges.

**Follow your child's lead on language.** Many families want to help their children keep their language after being adopted. However, understand that for your child, fitting in quickly is the most urgent and important instinct and need she or he has. Picking up English quickly and well will improve their quality of life and your relationship with him or her enormously. So make learning English their priority. Most will retain their basic ability in their first language, or are able to pick it up relatively easily in the future if they decide to pursue language study.

## School: Family Thoughts

*Our daughter, it turns out, was not well educated by her school in China. She is certainly smart enough, but apparently was permitted to spend much of her time in libraries and bookstores reading popular journals and novels instead of studying her academic subjects. She can read and write Chinese very well, appreciating Chinese translations of advanced English literature that she accurately described to me, but her English skills upon arrival in the United States were at the beginner level, and her math skills were equally dismal. I kept her out of the seventh grade for one semester to help her learn some basics.*

*She entered public school in the second semester of the 7th grade and I insisted that she be mainstreamed in regular classes. She worked hard at all of the assignments and passed all of her classes. In her 8th and 9th grade classes she made straight "A"s. She is now finishing her sophomore year of high school with honors classes and these became a struggle for her. Her fundamental problem seems to be one of confidence. We hear from her whenever she experiences some academic difficulty "I am horrible at math" or "I am horrible at science", or "I am horrible at languages". My mistake was in pushing our daughter into academically difficult classes. Additional easy classes may have given her more time to develop that important self confidence necessary to overcome academic challenges.*

Dad of Beth, adopted at age 13

*Public school was the best option for us. She has a Cantonese/Mandarin tutor that goes to her school twice a week. Private schools don't have the resources that she needed. She is in special classes, ESL, where she is taught with other non-English speaking students that are mainly Hispanic. She is picking up some Spanish words at school and at home. We are concentrating on one language at a time. Spanish will be next once she is fluent in English. She will*

*never lose her Cantonese or Mandarin because of the internet movies she watches in Chinese.*

*Mom of Chloe, adopted at age 11*

*We were lucky enough to run into Josh and Lily in Beijing and Josh gave us some advice about schooling. He told us that we would be tempted to shelter her and keep her home to let her catch up on the language. He told us to enroll her in school and let her get acclimated to the language that way. And that is just what we did.*

*April entered 2nd grade on the first day back from Winter Break and the second graders were just beginning their study of China. She never faltered. She was not a strong student in China, according to her paperwork, but she is slow and steady and dedicated. After only a year and a half in this country, she passed all of our state Standards of Learning tests and had charmed each of her teachers. She knows what is expected of her and she does her best to meet your expectations. As for the language barrier, I used an Internet translation page twice. That was it.*

*April is very flexible. Soon after arriving back from China, we celebrated her first Christmas, she participated in a medieval 12th Night dance and festival and she started school within the first three weeks she was home with us. She never wavered as she climbed on the school bus and headed off to a place where no one spoke her language. She watches others, sees what they do and adjusts accordingly.*

*Mom of April, adopted at age 7*

*Our biggest and most surprising struggle has been school. We knew before we left China that Wayne was left-handed. It took his kindergarten teachers a full year to figure out which hand was dominant because he switched so often. I think he tried to be right-handed especially at meal time in*

China. We thought he didn't know how to use chopsticks but later realized that the older girl he liked put his chopsticks in his right hand and may have even told him to use his right hand. We went through four classrooms and two schools between August and November of his kindergarten year (he started just two months after his adoption) to find the best fit.

It took two years of school to figure out that what we thought was an active and frustrated boy was actually ADHD. That has been the hardest thing we have had to deal with. Since he was diagnosed so late, his school foundation is not stable. Our county will not let him repeat a grade until third grade, so he has spent every year of school trying to play catch up and keep up with the other kids. We have worked through workbooks every summer and have recently started him in an online program to try and catch up. Since his younger sister is just a year behind him, we are trying to keep him at grade level because even though they do not attend the same school right now, we hope that he will be able to join her at her school for middle and high school. It is best for both of them to have separate classes and friendships. He is very smart, but his struggles in school lead him to make statements like "I am stupid." He works so hard and gets frustrated that it comes so easily to others.

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

I took a few weeks off work and spent it at home with my son before enrolling him in school. MISTAKE. He needed the structure of school. Home was foreign. Home was scary. Of course, he bolted out of school on the first day and drew blood from an aide later that week, but school was routine, and he seemed to like the institutional setting once he settled in. After talking with the principal, it made sense to put him in kindergarten. While his age alone would have placed him in first grade, he was small, and he didn't know any English. By

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*He needed the structure of school.*

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*the beginning of June he was following directions and seemed to understand English, but he was still speaking Mandarin. Considering he landed on American soil on February 1st, I thought this was pretty good. Over the summer he attended day camps and that's when he really started speaking English.*

Mom of Chad, adopted at age 7



## Maintaining Old Friendships

The advent of social networking and internet-based communications brought easy contact between people no matter what their location— even in your child's home country. When adopting a preteen or teenage child, many parents are unsettled by the ease of contact between their child and those they knew before the adoption.

**Understand the need of your child to maintain contacts.** Some teens want to keep in touch with everyone they knew before, including orphanage workers and other children left behind. Others have memories of one good friend who was adopted ahead of them or still waiting behind, and want to keep in touch. Having these relationships helps your child bridge the major changes in their life, and provides contacts that understand where they come from and what they have experienced in a way that no one else can. These contacts can help your child preserve their language, feel connected to their home country, and provide needed explanations and discussions about changes they are experiencing.

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*Having these relationships helps your child bridge the major changes in their life, and provides contacts that understand where they come from.*

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**Don't be afraid to set limits.** Even with the positive benefits of keeping some contacts, some children can be overwhelmed or too involved with keeping in contact with those in their past. Some teens can become so involved in internet communications with those in their home country that they neglect developing relationships with those in their new family— which is sorely needed, especially the first few months after adoption. Communicate limits on time allowable for your child to spend on the internet talking to old friends.

**Encourage relationships in person.** Just like any other child, adopted children may be prone to keeping their relationships over the internet to the expense of in-person contacts. If possible, find some children who have already been adopted that your child knew in country, and arrange for them to be in contact. Join groups of parents with children adopted from the same country so that your child can make new friends with similar experiences. Having access to these types of contacts may be beneficial for your child for the same reasons as contacts in country, but with fewer problems.

## Relationships: Family Thoughts

One other thing that may come up for your children is racial slurs. Teach your children how to handle them. A hateful Asian joke was shared with my daughter at school, and she simply stated, "Do you realize that I have two Asian siblings?" The jokester got the point, and she did not have to be overly confrontational or nasty.

Mom of Wynn, adopted at age 6

If your child is a boy and has been in long-term foster care with the same family, consider the effect of Chinese customs on rearing boys. Your son may have never been told "no". Although we had read about "Little Emperor's Syndrome" we felt that a strong mother and four sisters could manage it. WRONG!! If you are a strong woman and accustomed to respect from your existing children, really examine how you will feel when your newly adopted child will not respect you or follow rules because you are a woman.

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*The hardest part of this difficult transition for our particular son has been dealing with his superior attitude.*

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The hardest part of this difficult transition for our particular son has been dealing with his superior attitude. He wants the best and he wants it first. Yes, we understand that he has had to watch out for himself, but his behavior is beyond belief. He acts as if he inherited the kingdom and it's all his. Forget about the four sisters who came before him, he is the boy and that is all that matters. It will take some time to re-teach him our way. It is deeply engrained in him, more than we thought possible.

*I believe that he was told by someone in China that in America you could do or say anything that you wanted. I believe that he was told that he could have anything that he wanted. Our exchange student told us this too.*

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6



## Section 4

### Parenting Challenges



Many seasoned parents find that their tried and true methods of parenting are out the window when parenting an adopted child. Without the benefit of those first years of childhood to train and help your child develop behaviors you would like them to have, many of the common assumptions about behavior and discipline just aren't effective or true for your older adopted child. Families are met with the task of not only training their children, but helping them unlearn negative habits and behaviors that were either taught to them in the orphanage or developed as a response to fears the child has faced alone.

**Creativity and imagination** may help you gain insight into your child's behavior, and what method might help you address it. Parents who are able to see the world through their child's eyes when the child is misbehaving are better able to find the root of the problem, and are more successful with discipline.

Be aware that there can be a honeymoon period from several months to several years where things seem to be going very well. This may be followed by a regression in behavior, and emotional regulation that leads you to ask 'what happened to this child?' This may signify your child is feeling safe enough to let down their guard and reveal their pain and grief, their 'stuff', and trust that you won't reject them. This might be an excellent time to reach out for additional support as your child is signaling a readiness to revisit their earlier trauma.



## Discipline

Every parent faces the need to discipline their child at some point, and that is especially true with adopted children. However, parents are often at a loss when it comes to disciplining their older adopted child either because they are aware of the potential difficulties of dealing with their child, or they try traditional discipline methods and are unsuccessful. It is helpful to keep in mind the purpose of discipline is not the same as punishment. Discipline is meant to teach your child to behave in a manner appropriate for your family. You can discipline your child without punishment.

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*Discipline is meant to teach your child to behave in a manner appropriate for your family. You can discipline your child without punishment.*

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**Avoid physical punishments.** This method of discipline is common, and is often an easy one to use, especially when you are angry. However, it is almost never appropriate for adopted children. These kids have been physically punished in the orphanage, possibly even in an abusive manner. For some children, physical discipline is traumatizing. For others, it is merely ineffective. It is much better to address behavior challenges in non-physical ways.

**Make your expectations clear.** If your child is behaving in a way you disapprove of, make your expectations known to your child in a clear, simple, and concise manner. Avoid lecturing, and make sure your child understands by asking them to repeat what you expect. It can also help to show your child what you want them to do and to model what you expect, instead of just telling them. Praise them for doing well!

**Establish clear consequences, and follow through.** Make sure your child knows if the behavior continues what the consequence will be, and make the consequence appropriate. For many older adopted children, loss of



technology privileges goes a long way. As you get to know your child, you will learn what will be the most effective for them. Whatever the consequence, if your child does not follow your expectations, make the consequence clear and immediate. Also make sure the consequence is tolerable for their age and emotional maturity. Loss of technological privileges for an hour may be all your child can really handle, but enough to make sure they understand your desires.

**Use positive reinforcement, praising behavior you approve of.** Show your approval of your child's behavior by verbally encouraging them and showing them you noticed their actions. This is much less negative than always focusing

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*Many older children are used to false promises, and will become very upset and even more difficult if you aren't able to keep a promise.*

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on problems, and helps children develop self esteem.

**Avoid bribing your child for good behavior.**

There are a couple of problems with bribery. First of all, it makes the motivation behind behavior material and external, rather than focused on the relationship. You want your

child to behave well because it meets your expectations and is the right thing to do, rather than because they want to receive something in return. The second problem is follow through. If you promise your child something for a certain behavior, be careful that you keep your promise! Many older children are used to false promises, and will become very upset and even more difficult if you aren't able to keep a promise. If you want to reward your child with a special activity, don't relate it to any specific behavior. Rather, reward them for 'just being a great kid'.

**Learn some good basic techniques that work for your family.** Some children respond well to a short time-out or, preferably, a "time-in" where the child is close by but not left alone, as some children feel abandoned by time-out. They may do better if they are isolated with a parent for a few minutes to calm down and discuss the problem. Experiment with tone of voice to see what is effective

with your child, without triggering a fear response. Your child may interpret your stern voice as an attempt to be funny, or as overly angry. You will need to find a balance that your child understands. Another technique that is often effective is offering choices— give your child two or three options that are all acceptable, and let them choose. Do they want to clean their room first, and then go to the park, or go to the park and then clean their room? Whichever they choose is fine, but they must follow through with whatever is agreed upon. Do a little research and talk to other families to see what will be the most effective for you. Experiment with discipline techniques that are typically used with younger children, keeping in mind your child's chronological age is likely different from their emotional age. Showing them “how to” comply with your requests, staying in a teaching mode as much as possible, will a long way.

**Read an adoption viewpoint into any discipline system.** There are many parenting and discipline strategies out there that offer ways to consistently discipline your child. Many of these can be successful, but take a step back and think about the unique challenges of an adopted child before implementing the strategy. A good example is the ‘love and logic’ strategy— this is a great option for many kids, but is not well received by adopted children. While biologically raised/infant adopted children can usually tolerate natural consequences well, leaving your older adopted child to deal with natural consequences can leave them feeling unloved and uncared for— all too similar to life in the orphanage. Another strategy may meet the need for discipline as well their need to feel safe and loved in your home.

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### **Discipline: Family Thoughts**

*Each boy was totally different at the meeting, in ways that clearly showed their different personalities. Josh was 6. He was near tears for much of the first hours. Maison, who was 4 at the time, was exuberant and joking as long as a*

familiar person was with us. His brief bouts of tears were easily placated with candy or diversions.

With both boys, the biggest challenge within China was establishing rules. Maison didn't understand 'no' and for his safety, we had to set boundaries. Josh often became angry when one of the other kids got a turn riding on Dad's shoulders or whatever. It was hard to be firm and set the guidelines while in China and somewhat in a fishbowl. The people were very positive about our having the boys, but we weren't sure how to treat tantrums while being the center of several dozen people's attention! We let some things by in China that would not have been ignored at home.

Mom of Josh, adopted at age 6, and  
Maison, adopted at age 4

I read all the books on discipline and our experience was very similar to what the books said. He won't cry or show remorse when he is punished. One plus for adopting an older child is that taking away electronics privilege really works!! Time-outs have worked. It takes the usual person about 6 weeks to learn a new behavior. It took him about 4-5 weeks of time-outs to learn to stop running through the house.

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*Being very clear and consistent is a must.*

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He wants to be in control at all times. We had a breakthrough one evening when I told him to "let me love him". I have also held him like a baby and rocked him. Use times of illness to make some progress in bonding and attachment. They are more likely to rely on you when they are sick.

Being very clear and consistent is a must!! I was resentful that I had to be so firm from day one and he didn't get to see the nice, fun person that I can be. His behavior was so bad in China we knew we had to be really firm and

*consistent once home. His behavior took the "fun" out of parenting him. Fortunately, teaching him our holiday family traditions made up for some of it!*

*The discipline technique that has worked the best on the other children is positive parenting. Complimenting the great things they do and minimizing the negative things. Our older children would point out their own positive things if we didn't say something! I think due to the initial language barrier, this technique hasn't work as well. As the English improves, the compliments have more meaning. We are hopeful that are continued efforts of praise will eventually make a difference.*

*Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6*

## Lying

Lying is a common problem with adopted children, and a problem that very quickly gets under the skin of many parents. It is especially irritating when it seems your child lies for no reason, or lies when there is no need to lie. Your child may lie about the smallest things, or may make up stories to either receive praise or a negative reaction from you.

**Realize where lying comes from.** Lying is likely another survival habit learned at the orphanage to avoid trouble with other children or adults. Your child has also probably never learned the importance of telling the truth, or the social expectation of truthfulness.

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*Lying is likely a survival habit learned at the orphanage.*

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Some children may not even recognize the difference between truth and lies! It is also possible that your child is lying as a form of manipulation to obtain control. As you get to know your child, the reason behind their lying, whether it is fear, lack of knowledge, or manipulation, should become clearer.

**Address the reasons for lying.** If your child is lying out of fear, compassionately try to limit those fears. Often children in the first couple of years of placement will lie because the attachment isn't yet secure, and the child may lie to protect their relationship with you. Help your child know that they will not be punished for small infractions, and that even major disobedience is handled with love. Be patient with the lying, and focus on helping to address the fear. If your child seems to lie without knowing he is lying, make a game of learning the difference. Play Truth or Lie with your child, having them guess which of two statements is true or false. Allow them to provide statements for you to guess as well. This will help your child learn the difference. Also, calmly acknowledge when your child is telling truth or a falsehood, so they recognize the difference

and that you appreciate the truth. Punishing your child for lying when they don't understand the difference will only discourage them more.

**If you believe your child is lying to manipulate you, get perspective from another set of eyes.** Our cultural belief is that lying is always meant to manipulate, and it can be difficult to break that belief. If there does seem to be a power struggle, read the section on control and power for more information.

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### Lying: Family Thoughts

*Examine the way you were raised about lying. Consider how you treat lying with your current children. Know going in to it that you may deal with lying, and often. We knew that lying was typical of older children. I didn't know how frustrated I would become when he lied about brushing his teeth. After spending time for four dental visits and our vacation fund on dental work I thought he might be happy to brush his teeth. No, just like any other child. Some lies might be more hurtful than others. You may feel like you are doing everything you can to help your child, only to be lied to. It's hard to accept as progress when, instead of lying about hitting his one-armed two-year-old brother across the face with a hot wheels track, he told the truth. You have to take baby steps.*

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

*Your child will likely lie and will likely exhibit behavior that you have never allowed in your home. You have to pick your battles and try to think the way your child would think remembering they have a different history than your other children. Sometimes the situation calls for more grace than discipline, and at least one parent needs to realize that, and the other parent needs to be willing to hear that.*

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

## Control Issues

The orphanage is a tough place to grow up. Growing up without parental authority and love is the saddest misfortune. Older adopted children can develop aggressive and take-care-of-myself behavior, or may have an attitude against authority. Some families find themselves in the midst of constant power struggles with their adopted older child.

**Evaluate your expectations.** If you are the boss of the family and expect your orders to be followed without slight disobedience, then you may want to learn 'power sharing' for a while to allow the transition for your new child. Power sharing is giving your child some say over a circumstance, such as the choice of which book to read before they go to bed, or in what order they do things- do they want to play for five minutes, and then pick up their toys, or pick up their toys, and then play? Your child may either have no idea how to respond to authority, or may have no respect for authority whatsoever. Eventually your child will learn, but they may need some time.

**Be positive and tolerant, and keep an open mind.** Your child may have behaviors you believe are wrong, or make you uncomfortable. It may help to remember where your child has come from—where has your child learned what is appropriate

behavior? A child who has not had the experience of being in a family, and certainly not your family, will take time to learn what behavior is appreciated in your home. Your child may have stunted development, acting more like an 8-year-old when she's 12, and may have different ways of expressing emotion that are not what you consider normal for your family or their gender. Patience and tolerance are needed here- you will

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*A child who has not had the experience of being in a family, and certainly not your family, will take time to learn what behavior is appreciated in your home.*

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not be successful in changing your child's behaviors, reactions, or development all at once. Accept your child as who they are at that moment, and recognize that as your child fully becomes a member of your family, he will adapt and grow. It will take time. Remember, our children need our understanding, support and guidance.

**Understand where the need for control comes from.** A child who has spent considerable time in an orphanage learned to be in control at all times as a means of survival. Their controlling or manipulating behavior in the first few months after adoption has the same purpose- they are surviving the trauma of being uprooted and transferred to your family. You know your child is safe. It will take your child time to understand this. In the meantime, your child is controlling the situations they come in contact with so that they will not be taken by surprised or find themselves in a bad situation. Allowing your child some measure of control during this time will help them as they adapt to life with you.

**Decide what amount of control you can allow.** For some parents, the initial reaction to this is none. However, deciding where you can bend ahead of time can limit arguments and power clashes. This is another great time to practice giving your child choices. Deciding when, in what order, with whom, and in what way are all ways you can empower your child to have control and accomplish what you wish of them. Also, try to say 'yes' as often as you can!

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### Control Issues: Family Thoughts

*We expected to be tested, however the level at which our child was functioning was beyond belief. He is a master of control and manipulation. We understand this is part of his survival technique. It takes a long time for them to feel safe and "let down their guard". He would act like an angel in front of grandparents to disprove anything we might have said, then the next day return*



to prior negative behavior. Pushing my buttons was a constant for four months straight. It has eased up for the past two months but he slips back in to it at times. He likes being in control. We understand it's because he feels safer when he is in control. It makes it no less frustrating. It has been one of the hardest aspects of adopting an older child. We believe that his behavior is directly related to wanting to monopolize our attention.

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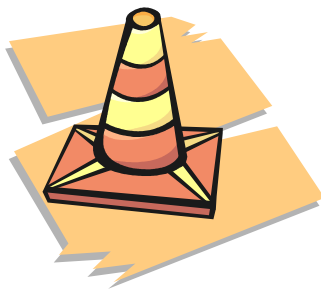
*We understand he feels safer when he's in control. It makes it no less frustrating.*

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Adoptive mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

## Section 5

### Potential Problems



Though many adoptions of older children work out very well with just a few hiccups along the way, there are always a few that are more of a struggle, with more serious problems to contend with. Many difficulties can be avoided by having the right mindset and being well prepared before the adoption, but some struggles your child comes with will just be part of who they are. For these potential problems, it is best to plan ahead. Recognize the difference between a minor or 'typical' struggle and a more severe difficulty that might need additional help. Know your resources and where to get help if you need it, and be willing to draw on those resources instead of feeling you have to fight through alone. Most importantly, be **open-minded**, and make sure your expectations of your child are **realistic**.



## Grief and Loss

No adoption story is without some loss, and those losses must be grieved. One potential difficulty in adopting an older child is that the older the child, the more clearly they remember what they have lost and what has happened in the past. While it's true your child has made many gains by joining your family, he has also lost many things. Loss of control, of the dream of being part of a birth family, of family members (biological or experienced 'family' in the orphanage), and connections to their culture and life before the adoption could all be felt by your child.

**Ask as many questions as you can about your child's history.** This may not get you very far if the information is scarce, but the more information you have about your child and where they come from will help you be prepared for what their experience may be like after the adoption. Your child may not feel comfortable sharing everything with you, especially not right away, or may expect that you already know. Showing your understanding of their past can be one way to develop trust between you and your child.

**Be willing to hear the hard stuff.** Your job isn't to fix it, and your child's feelings aren't a personal attack. The more you show your child you are willing to hear their hard stories,

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*Your job isn't to fix it.*

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even if they share experiences of abuse, neglect, or that they wish they were never adopted, the more willing they will be to trust you with their stories, as well as new experiences they have.

**Validate their feelings.** Your child's feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, and joy are all valid in their experience. Even if you don't understand, validating their feelings, or giving them permission to feel how they feel, will help as they process and understand their own experience.

**Know what is normal grieving for your child and their age.** Many parents expect their children to grieve like adults— crying, acting depressed, or withdrawing are common adult grief responses. However, children very rarely grieve like adults. More common child grieving can include hyperactivity, sullenness, angry outbursts, avoidance of certain activities or people, or 'shutting down'. Be careful to identify these as grief reactions, and not as pure misbehavior or mental illness. Also be prepared for delayed grief. Children may be so overwhelmed at first at the adjustment that the grief doesn't

**Know when grieving is not normal.** If your child's grief, sadness, or other grieving behaviors are not improving or get worse after several months of being home, you may need to seek help. Taking your child to a counselor will not be helpful at first when your child is still learning language and culture, but you can visit a counselor to discuss your child and see what you can do to help.

**Don't expect your child to finish grieving.** Your child's grief should lessen as a whole over time, but your child will never completely stop the grieving process. As children grow and develop, they may experience grief in different ways. A child adopted at 6 may show grief at first and then again in several years when thinking about families in a new way, and again when she gets to her preteen years when her thinking becomes more abstract and she considers what it means to not know her birth family. Your child may also experience grief in new ways at times of transition, such as when you move to a new home or he starts a new school. Be prepared for these changes, and be available for your child at those times to show your understanding of their life journey.

**Learn about the art of grieving for your child and your family.** Grieving is a difficult process for many families because it is unexpected and difficult— and our culture doesn't allow for open expression of grief. There is an art to grieving that can be learned and used to help get through and grow from the grief process. Some ideas include journaling about feelings, listening to or using music, engaging in physical activity that is enjoyed, allowing for times of crying,

spending time to laugh and play even when it hurts, or expressing grief through art. Find ways to encourage your child—and your family—to express the grief of adoption in a way that is meaningful for her. Another important way to grieve is to create family rituals or times of remembrance. Perhaps your child wants to write a letter to his birth mom and send it into the sky in a helium balloon, or keep them in a special box. Maybe every year on her birthday you recognize the wonderful gift that her birth mom gave her in giving her life, and also recognize the sadness that comes with not having a relationship with her. Setting aside traditions and times to recognize grief can help set your child and family free to talk about and experience the sadness they experience, and having an open outlet for these strong emotions makes it easier to cope.

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### **Grief and Loss: Family Thoughts**

*We had just been home a week when we stopped by the agency office to introduce our daughter Cindy and to ask for a native speaker to talk to her since she was not yet understanding much English. The conversation turned to her information that suggested she came to the orphanage at age six. We learned that she had actually been adopted at one year by a domestic family where she had suffered abuse. After five years they returned her to the orphanage. I remember hearing this story unfold and I broke into tears. My heart broke for my new daughter. I knew that my job to reassure her and keep her safe had been elevated a new level. Clearly, she had been through an abusive family relationship and would take time to learn what it was like to be in our family. Cindy told the story matter-of-factly, but we know that eventually her story of pain, grief, and loss will need to be addressed and we need to be ready for it.*

Adoptive mom of Cindy, adopted at age 12

## Sexual History and Activity

Many of us are aware that children in institutionalized settings are at risk for exploitation, sexual abuse by caregivers, or even sexual exploration among peers where there is unsupervised group care. However, it is not always something that is fully prepared for when an older child enters the adoptive family. Many of these experiences will not be known immediately upon placement. They may become evident shortly thereafter or it may be many months or even years before adoptive parents learn about their older child's experiences prior to their placement in their family.

**Educate and examine your own attitudes, concerns, and fears around sexual abuse and sexual exploration.** Read about what is normal sexual development in children, preteens, and adolescents. Reflect on your own experiences and get comfortable talking about sexual-related issues. Learn the signs of sexual abuse as intellectual understanding allows for empathetic understanding!

**Be ready to explain to your newly adopted child about normal boundaries** in the home and what privacy means when someone is in the bathroom or the bedroom. Your child may not know that the bathroom door should be closed every time he goes to the bathroom, she may also come out of the bathroom undressed, or feel fine running around the house naked. Educating your child about your expectations may eliminate the problem, by just helping them learn the rules of the house. If your child has a history of sexuality beyond what is typical for their age, this will help them learn that your home is a safe place for them and for other family members.

**Set up a safety net in your home for your adoptive child and for other children in the home.** If your child has had some of these experiences or exposure to inappropriate boundaries, remember to keep your reactions in check and understand that your child is behaving or responding behaviorally to what has

happened in their life before. Be ready to listen and support. Don't ask too many questions but rather allow your child to say as much or as little as they may want. If you can avoid panicking or overreacting, you can keep the door open for this child to express their sexual experiences or trauma, if applicable.

**Prepare for closer supervision needs.** You may need to have closer supervision for this child for a long time and be ready to have conversations with all of your children in the home about what is "safe" touch and what to do if those boundaries are being crossed. This is not the time for a judgmental response but

rather the time for clear expectations and, if needed, professional support for your family and this child to help them as they learn what it means to be a part of a family. If you find that there are some sexualized behaviors exhibited by your child, you may need to set up door alarms on everyone's doors. This will let you know if your newly adopted child is wandering at night, and will help ensure security for the whole family. Putting an alarm on everyone's door will help your child not feel singled out as the 'problem', and will also help them understand that safety is a concern for all members of the family.

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*This is not the time for a judgmental response, but rather the time for clear expectations and professional support for your family.*

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### **Sexual History and Activity: Family Thoughts**

*The unexpected was finding our daughter casually looking through pornographic material on her computer, or acting provocatively with members of the family. It threw us off guard, and we didn't know how to address it. It took some help to figure out how to talk to a child who barely understood English about appropriate sexual behaviors and our rules for what she could and could not do online. We realize we might have to go more deeply into this issue, but*



*setting boundaries is the best we can do until our relationship with her is more stable.*

Dad of Alice, adopted at age 12

*Shortly after arriving home, we noticed one of the ways our twin boys played together was through "sexual play". The play was more evident when the boys were stressed. It appeared that this came from being poorly supervised, but not that our children had been victimized by an adult. However, it was a way they found enjoyable to cope with stress and boredom. The difficult part for us was to learn to manage our responses to the behaviors, so that we could avoid being triggered by the behavior. Our job was to teach them more appropriate way to play, share affection, and learn personal boundaries. We also had to work with our other children to be thoughtful, knowing that the boys were learning about appropriate privacy and touch. It forced our family to quickly get comfortable talking about sexuality and, in the long run, helped us grow.*

Mom of Rick and Darren, adopted at age 6

## Aggressive Behaviors

Some adopted children act aggressively in their new families and homes, largely as a habit learned in the orphanage. Aggression can also be a trauma reaction, a response to feelings of fear, or a response to loss of control in a situation. While in the orphanage, aggression may have been a sign of strength, a method of defense against other children or adults who could potentially harm them, or just a way of life to establish a hierarchy in the orphanage. Aggression may have allowed your child to survive in an environment that was incredibly difficult. However, now that they are home and safe, aggression can be difficult for families to deal with. The main focus should be on patiently helping your child redirect their strength to a more appropriate avenue.

**Evaluate the level of aggression.** Calling names may be annoying, but not harmful—hitting, biting, kicking, and throwing things, however, can be a safety issue. If the behavior won't harm anyone, be patient and give your child space. If the behavior is harmful, try to find a way to separate your child from those they are trying to hurt (without isolating them) to give them a chance to calm down. Chances are your child is either scared or feeling threatened, and doesn't know how to respond. After your child has cooled off a little, try to talk to them (or enlist the help of a translator) to find out what is going on. Adjust your own behavior or actions if necessary, and encourage your child to try a more acceptable behavior next time.

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*They have had no ability to control what goes on in day-to-day life, but have also developed independence from lack of authority.*

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**Recognize the need for control.** Older adopted children can be both power hungry and power starved. They have had no ability to control what goes on in day-to-day life, which results in a feeling of having no power, but have also

developed independence from lack of authority. Aggression can be a means to gain control over a situation. This might involve running away, breaking things or destroying things you have given them, or even defecating in inappropriate places. These are behaviors that your child will need to un-learn. The best response to these situations is calm and control, as difficult as it is. Becoming overly angry or anxious can cause the problem to escalate, and may encourage such behavior later on when your child wants your attention or to gain control. If your child learns that this type of behavior won't rattle you, they will be more likely to learn other more appropriate ways to respond. Of course, reasonable boundaries are also needed. If your child is prone to running away, limit their opportunities by safety locking windows and doors. If your child breaks and destroys things, don't provide replacement items until they have learned to take good care of their possessions.

### Aggressive Behaviors: Family Thoughts

*He was home three months before he entered kindergarten. He has gotten multiple conduct checks. We expected that he may be trying to make friends or impress them, overcome the language barrier etc, but he admitted to throwing his drink cup in the cafeteria for fun, hitting someone with a spoon, scratching, not following directions, pinching, making annoying sounds, interrupting (he thinks he is that important) writing bad notes about his teacher, and eating someone's lunch. You might think he was hungry, but it may be that he just wanted it or thought that he deserved it. He has passive aggressive behavior. He does almost everything that we ask, but will intentionally not do something. He also tries to annoy those around him by making noises, humming, walking loudly (he*

*He just wants attention any way that he can get it.*

*is as quiet as a mouse when he is sneaking around). He just wants attention any way that he can get it.*

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

*Despite the fun times, there were problems from day one. Chad would rage. I don't mean hissy-fit, I mean RAGE. He threw things, kicked, screamed, flipped furniture, tore up books, and scratched people bloody. This would happen up to a couple of times a day and could last an hour or so. Although it was understandable—he was upset, feeling lost, and grieving—the kid would be happy one minute and violent the next, with no apparent warning. By the time we left Nanjing, I was already having to bear hug him for his and my safety. I will forever be grateful to the men in our travel group who would come to my aid. He calmed down for the men more quickly than he would for me. I joked with my travel companion and some of the other families that I was sent on their trip to make them all feel good about their own adoptions. Mine seemed so much more difficult.*

*He would also attempt to run away. Every phone he saw (even with his limited vision), he'd make a bee line to and try to make calls. Marion said he was trying to call the orphanage. We were originally supposed to visit his orphanage during the week we were in Nanjing, but he was so upset and so desperate to get back that the plans were changed, and we did not go. During one of his first bolts, I instantly went from being a person who couldn't use a bathroom if another person was in earshot to a mom that could only use the bathroom if my child was sitting in my lap. Another time, he ducked into a revolving door so fast and at the very last minute that I thought he was going to be severed. How on earth was I going to take him on an airplane?*

Mom of Chad, adopted at age 6

## Mental Illness

Mental illness can happen with both biological and adopted children, though it is fairly rare with both. However, adoptive children can be diagnosed with mental health problems due to some of their challenging circumstances and behaviors, as well as legitimate mental illnesses. While relatively few adopted children receive mental health diagnoses, it can be helpful to have a few things in mind.

**Be wary of labels.** When children have difficult behaviors, many professionals are quick to provide a diagnosis. The most common is the feared Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD). However, only in a few circumstances are labels really helpful, and even then should be taken with a grain of salt. If you are concerned about your child, seek out professionals who specialize in adoption, if possible. It can be easy to identify mental illness where a common adoption problem is present. If your child is given a diagnosis, confirm it with another professional, and research to make sure it fits. For example, some nutritional deficiencies can cause behavioral

problems like ADHD, or your child's normal grief reaction to the adoption can cause what seems like violent or angry behavior.

Adopted children come with a whole host of unique difficulties, including nutrition and grief, but also including sensory, neurological, emotional regulation, and speech issues. These things can present as disorders, but are often mitigated with the right environment and help from the right resources. Having a flexible view of the problem will greatly affect treatment and its effectiveness.

**Focus on your child, not the diagnosis.** Even if you have a diagnosis that seems accurate, don't focus too strongly on the diagnosis. Focus on what your child

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*Focus on what your child needs, not on the label.*

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needs. This is especially true in a diagnosis like Reactive Attachment Disorder. Trying to tackle the whole disorder can be overwhelming, but recognizing your child's primary struggle is resistance to comfort, or a desperate need to please can help narrow down what treatment will be most effective. Treating the symptoms you and your child are experiencing is much more manageable, and you will be more likely to start seeing improvement.

**Find support.** Support is important for all families with adopted children, but especially so when your adopted child is also dealing with a mental illness. Join a group where you can talk frankly about your experience and be accepted and understood. Research respite care in your area if you feel you need a break from your child but need to make sure they are safe. Reach out to your social worker or other professionals to find resources where you can find the support you need.

**Stay strong, and realistic.** Mental health diagnoses can quickly become too large to bear or limit the way you and others view your child's behavior. It may help to just accept your child as she is, and move forward. No child is perfect, and with adequate support and resources you can help him manage his disorder and enjoy life together. This may mean being prepared to make safety plans for other children or family members in the home, taking your child to another city for a complete evaluation, or needing to make a difficult decision about whether your child can remain in your home and receive the best treatment. Find someone who can help you through the tough decisions and stick with you during the emotional rollercoaster, and stay strong so you can continue to love and provide for your child the best you can.

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## Mental Illness: Family Thoughts

*Despite some progress, there were the dark moments, playing orphanage, looking at China photos, destroying what he had created, bloody*

nightmares, and nightly "fits". He lost his first baby tooth after face planting into the wall at 11:30 pm. He could only go to sleep if he was angry, so every night he picked a fight with me. On occasion he would urinate on his bed or under the dining room table, especially if he thought I was watching. He hoarded food. On the way to school one day he asked, "How do I know you didn't kidnap me?" He was in fear that his teachers were going to hit him. He had massive test anxiety. He displayed a misplaced trust in strangers while not believing mom. I had to remove anything stick-like (long Lincoln logs and wooden cooking spoons) because he would use them to self-punish. He showed no response to pain. If he was hurt or sick he would sit in his closet. He continued to try to run away. I had to put locks on the doors to lock him in the house. Then later, I had to modify them because he locked me out of the house. He continually and repeatedly pushed and pushed (misbehaving) until I'd finally get upset. It seemed like he was creating self-fulfilling prophecies that were focused on negative attention. He had "no problems at school". He was "such a charming and well behaved boy". At home he was a terror.

The pediatrician had me and his teacher and daycare providers all fill out behavior surveys. She looked them over, said the case was too complicated and referred us to a child psychiatrist. Within a few visits he was diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome (the tic and sniff). Soon after that "Bipolar disorder" came into the conversation. My son was nine years old. We started the meds. He did better, but then he seemed to build up tolerance to the meds (or grow), and we'd have to adjust. Still the anxiety was running really high. Five years after I adopted him, at age 11 and after a year and a half of psychiatric care, he was still a mess. We added another drug (Depakote) to the mix and a severe downward spiral began.

I wanted my son "well". I do not regret adopting Chad. He's my son. I have learned so much from him. BUT, I wish I knew the signs of his mental illness earlier. I wish the medications worked better. I wish I had understood about kids

who act out sexually, the laws, and any potential warning signs. I wish I could provide a life for Luke that isn't burdened with his brother's problems. I still want to help Chad reach his potential, but he has to see that potential, and I don't believe he does. Chad is insatiable, as many Bipolar II's are. He's insecure, and unfortunately he seems most comfortable when he's in an unhappy place. In many ways, he is his own worst enemy.

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*Be prepared. Look for signs of abuse before the child repeats it on others. Some kids do not want to be adopted. Love is sometimes not enough.*

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*Be prepared. Look for signs of abuse before the child repeats it on others. Be prepared for the possibility that this child may choose to behave in such a way that you will be taxed emotionally and financially in ways you never dreamed possible. Some kids do not want to be adopted. Love is sometimes not enough.*

Mom of Chad, adopted at age 6





## Section 6

### Advice from Adoptive Parents



Preparation is the most important part of adopting an older child. It's important to understand what is possible, what difficulties you may face, and what you can do or where you can turn when those things come up. The most helpful information, however, comes from those families who have been there, faced the joys and challenges of adopting an older child, and found their own way through the journey. In this section, you can find the advice and experiences from those parents who have already gone through the adoption of an older child. Not all of these families had easy adoption stories, and some had almost no problems at all. Every family is different, every child is different. These parents help provide the **insight** into real life adoptions that can help put all the information in perspective.



We were very excited to meet our son; of course, he was shy (5 years old) but was carrying our picture. He kept looking at our picture and then at us. He was in a private orphanage and he was very prepared for the adoption. We had heard that he was very excited and was talking to volunteers about his new family. He was ready (as much as he could be) for us, but probably not for the move to his original orphanage that happened about three weeks prior to our receiving him. They took him from the only home he had ever remembered to a holding orphanage. I think it confused him since I believe he thought he was coming straight to us. The private orphanage talks to their kids about their new family and tries to get them excited and thinking positive about the adoption. They made it a positive that their new family found them.

He was so excited and could not believe that this was all for him. He kept asking if everything was really all his. He loved on me (mom) from the very beginning since he had wanted a family. I think this was a little unusual since I did not see the same interaction with the other adoptive children in our group. Even from those parents that got off to a colder start, I have heard things completely turned around in a very positive way once they all got home and settled. I got hugs and kisses immediately and he panicked when I left him while in China. He attached himself to me first but still loved having his dad. There were a few times he cried a little and language was a barrier, but he did not want anything to do with Chinese people and wanted to assimilate as fast as possible. He adjusted very well, he was just afraid to have me leave him and wanted assurances that I was coming right back. I would say that within six months we fell into a great routine and could communicate so much better.

Mom of Terry, adopted at age 5

One of the hardest things was disciplining the older child in public. The Chinese people were staring and your travel mates looked at you like, “how are you going to handle this tantrum?” The constant testing of limits of an older child is far more demanding than a younger child. Plus he would try to run away (like he wanted to play chase).

If adopting two children, the older one can require all of the attention through his behavior, leaving the younger child to bond with other family members. If adopting two at once, highly consider both parents traveling on the adoption trip.

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

Read as much as you can about older adoption. It will prepare you for the worst— which you should always expect— and then hope for the best. Be armed and ready to respond to whatever needs the child has. Each child's personality is different and how they respond to their orphan status will differ. Be patient and loving in all circumstances. Don't be afraid and don't “write them off”. Be patient, educated and

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*Don't have any expectations that they will act like normal teens, but on the other hand, don't expect them not to either.*

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loving in your responses to the children. Don't have any expectations they will act like normal teens, but on the other hand don't expect them not to either. They have all been through being abandoned or orphaned and deserve a chance to thrive in a loving environment.

Connect with other adoptive parents, for example, initially via Yahoo groups, Facebook, or through the local community. Nothing, nothing, nothing can replace firsthand experience. Someone you can call or email when you have a question or problem, someone who has or is in the same situation to recommend solutions. Books are great and we have read many and use them

as needed, but one on one relationship with other adoptive parents has been the most helpful.

Mom of Timothy, adopted at age 13, and  
Abe, adopted at age 12

Have a sense of humor. You will need it.

I always tell families to expect adoption to be a challenge. Your child will likely appreciate your efforts on their behalf. However, they are not going to come home thanking you for taking them from the only culture and the only people they have ever known. Some of their behavior will shock and embarrass you (like the time Wayne ran his hand along the butt of a customer in a grocery store).

There will be surprises, some good, some not so good. We knew our son  

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*Have a sense of humor. You will need it.*  

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had cleft lip and palate, and while we struggled with that, it was easy compared to what we did not know. We did not know about the ADHD, and that is in our faces every day and has to be addressed every day. It is exhausting. You have to be a team. Both parents have to be ready and willing to accept the challenge.

This is not for everyone. Even if you get the fairy tale, do not pressure other families to follow your lead. If they need encouragement, give it, but do not try and push adoption on anyone who is not open to it. We have consciously decided that our adopted and biological children are simply our children. We do not make them poster children for adoption.

You have to be laid back. If you try to control everything, you will set yourself up for failure.

It is worth it. I catch my breath over the simplest of things. A trip to play miniature golf or to a museum or a walk through the neighborhood may be things my kids would have missed in an orphanage. Even school may not have

been available. In exchange, I get to watch them grow and develop, build meaningful relationships, get lots of hugs, and tons of joy.

I would absolutely do it again. My entire extended family has fallen in love with our adopted children. It has opened their eyes and desires to adoption.

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 6

It's been almost 3 years for us with Linda, who was 10 when we adopted her. She had a tough time in China (although our initial meeting was really good) and tried to get away from us a few times, but looking back it seems more comical than dramatic. One thing we really weren't prepared for was the fact that she really liked (if that's the right word) living in an orphanage. For all of the horror stories she tells us, she still misses the tight schedule and the predictability of life in an institution. She liked her nannies, liked her roommates and thought she had a pretty good life. She still really struggles with free time. We have recently connected with all of the girls from her room in the orphanage (they all live in the US now), but it has caused her some pain - it's hard for her to put the past together with her present. We do notice that for someone so street smart, she is very naive and fairly immature for her age.

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*One thing we really weren't prepared for was the fact that she really liked living in an orphanage.*

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In so many ways, she has attached so much faster than we thought she ever would. However, we know we have a long way to go. We are so glad that our 2 younger kids came with us to China - it helped so much with attachment there and our transition home. I would highly recommend this to any family considering adopting an older child - having other children there really worked out for us. I would NOT recommend an older child to a couple

who want a first child - there was initially so much rejection of any emotional bonding that I don't think I could have handled it without my other 2 kids.

Mom of Linda, adopted at age 10

The bottom line - it's the luck of the draw. You may have an easy transition and you may not. All six of our children are very different, requiring different

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*Bottom line: it's the luck of the draw. You may have an easy transition, and you may not.*

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parenting techniques. Just when you think you find something that works they enter in to a new developmental stage. All in all, the positive outweighs the negative or we wouldn't continue to expand our family. Every day provides a challenge when you adopt any child, but the older child can pose a more complex situation. Some days prayer is all you have.

Mom of Miles, adopted at age 6

The China adoption experience was very peaceful and low-stress compared to the first six months of our new family life once back in America. I was not surprised that our daughter would act up and test our discipline. This we had gone through before with my first three children during their periodic visits, but my wife's expectations about a Chinese daughter were Confucian, and my wife has not recovered from that disappointment.

The adoption of a 13-year-old child was certainly a challenge for us. It was made somewhat easier by having a well-behaved younger daughter who was also adopted from China, and who bonded quickly with our new daughter. The two girls are great friends and work and study well together. The biggest difficulty we faced was the stress on our marriage. Many of our differences became apparent with this second adoption, and were not easily addressed or overlooked because our different ways of dealing with our new daughter



renewed them on a daily basis. I am not sure how other couples could handle a similar situation. Marriage is not easy anyway, but when an outside force uncovers some cracks, that force can sometimes be avoided so that the cracks do not become breaks. However, when that force is an adopted child, it can no longer be avoided. The cracks must then be admitted and lived with.

Perhaps one good thing for us to have done could have been to engage a family counselor from the very beginning of our adoption process, before there was really any evidence of discord.

Dad of Alice, adopted at age 12

The most helpful advice we got was from a family who had adopted twice from Korea and had two biological children. She said that each day and week give you more history together and the more history you have together the more you become a family. In short, it takes time. You love your child for a long time before you see him/her, but the child isn't as prepared to love you back right away. (The same is true for biological children. Parents don't get gratitude until the kids become parents themselves!)

Mom of Mason, adopted at age 6 and  
Jacob, adopted at age 4

My husband and I have two beautiful girls, our youngest we adopted 1st at the age of 3. Our oldest we adopted at the age of 10 through CCAI. We had a great experience with CCAI walking us through the adoption and felt as prepared as possible for great unknowns of parenthood with our second child. At the time of our first adoption I had done extensive research on my own, I used this information for our second adoption along with the information the social worker gave us to prepare. It was so very helpful to be connected with families that went in a group before us, they were able to visit with our daughter and take more photos.

I do feel our daughter was loved and cared for by the orphanage and seemed to be a somewhat of practical joker. They seemed to have prepared her but she was still very scared. Motion sickness is not a big problem in our family but we found that a scared little 10-year-old may need a little motion sickness medication and there was none to be found.

When we brought our daughter home the translation department was wonderful and helped with the language barrier and one of the families we connected with helped with some food ideas. The initial adjustment did not seem to take long (3-6months) and she found fast food, toys, clothes and shoes much to her liking. She warmed up to extended family fairly quickly even though there we did not live close. She seemed to feel she was coming into our youngest daughter's domain so community adjustment was a little more difficult.

We still struggle with health issues and after many years are just learning the full extent of her medical problems and still struggle at times with drama type behavior and a very, very strong personality.

Mom of Lexie, adopted at age 10

Would I encourage someone to consider an older child adoption? Most certainly, particularly if you have already been through the baby stages with another child. Babies are a lot of work. Rewarding work, but work nonetheless. Older children bring their own challenges but the ability to communicate and comfort is a remarkable gift in transitioning to a new family structure.

Mom of April, adopted at age 7

One piece of advice we got in a class that really resonated with me was, regardless what age your child is when you bring him home, he is a newborn in family age. Our son has been with us for almost three years and it does seem like there are times he is exploring and testing like a two-year-old.

Additionally, when getting to know me as his mother, I let him do the things an infant would do. Meaning, I let him touch my eyes or put his fingers in my mouth. He wanted to brush my hair, etc. He never really wanted to cuddle

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*Regardless what age your child is when you bring him home, he is a newborn in family age.*

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even though he wanted me to hold him. I think it was his way of trying to connect with me. It was never inappropriate and exactly what each of my three biological children did but at a much younger age. By allowing him to do this, it was like saying, "Yep, I am your mom and I belong to you." I did not want to pull away and make him think I did not want him to touch me even though it seemed sort of funny for a five-year-old to do this. But, like I said, he was a newborn in family years and the fascination or desire to do this did not last long. Sometimes he still likes to brush my hair. This may sound like I get the better deal out of this, however, he is all boy and I am not sure he understands what gentle means. I am lucky I still have any hair for him to brush!

I would do it all over again.

Mom of Wynne, adopted at age 5

I am not sure that I can even share what I wish I had been bettered prepared for. I was not expecting his initial response to me when we first received him (clingy). I held him so much that my arms and backed ached terribly. Maybe I should have worked out more. This really is true but sort of funny.

You never know how your child will respond to either parent or situation so I tried to be universally prepared for whatever our child would need or be like. I think it disturbed me how desperately he wanted a family of his own. You could see it in their faces of all the children (mostly older in our group) that they were tired and scared, their tummies' were upset from stress, but all in all most were

just quiet trying to take in their situation. I think that it is important to not let the early days or weeks of the adoption be about you and your feelings but, more importantly, about theirs. They have had no say in their situation. Even though we know that we will do the best for them and love them, they don't really know that yet. Lots of love and patience and most of all, consistency. I have

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*It's important to not let the early days or weeks of the adoption be about you and your feelings, but, more importantly, about theirs.*

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heard many times that parents were correcting their kids from the moment they have them. Better to let some things go so you can build trust. They will take redirection much better if they know the love is there too. There will be a lot of correction needed later as they test the waters but they need to trust you first. I am not saying that you allow hitting or things like that, but better to use a gentle hand and a calm "no". Learn to say I love you in Mandarin and say it all the time.

Mom of Wayne, adopted at age 5



## Section 7

### Advice from Adoptees



One of the best things about adopting an older child is their ability to communicate their needs, expectations, and emotions (at least when they are comfortable enough to do so!). Here is a little advice from a couple brave adopted children willing to share their opinions and advice to families who are interested in adopting an older child, like them.



I asked April what she would tell someone considering adopting an older child. She is not, by any stretch, a deep thinker, but I believe that has been a benefit to us. She literally goes with the flow and she is willing to try anything with our family. These are the thoughts she shared with me: “I was afraid to be adopted. I had a friend who wanted to be adopted and he was. I saw Dad’s black hair and thought I had a Chinese family. I was scared when I knew you weren’t Chinese. I think that people should adopt an older child because they can help take care of themselves and they can do many things that babies can’t do. Babies are a lot of work but older children can take care of themselves and their things.”

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*I think that people should adopt an older child because they can help take care of themselves and do many things that babies can’t do.*

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April, adopted at age 7

Our sons said writing letters and sending pictures was very helpful although they still did not want to believe they were really getting adopted until we showed up. They also said bringing their new brother from the US on the adoption trip helped them be with someone their age that they could hang out with and bond with. They said it would be helpful to have more salty and oily foods available at home, and for parents to understand what it is that they ate in their area of China. We did this— it was not possible to reinvent their favorites due to the cultural barriers, but we tried. They said all the older kids they knew wanted to be adopted, but were losing hope someone would adopt them. They were scared but knew that they wanted a family even if it meant they lost their food, culture and friends. They

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*All the older kids they knew wanted to be adopted, but were losing hope someone would adopt them.*

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recommended parents searching for other kids they know and connect via Skype or QQ so they could stay connected. The biggest thing they want people to know who are considering adopting older kids is not to be scared. These kids want homes and need parents and love.

Timothy, adopted at age 13, and

Abe, adopted at age 12

I was very confused when I first came to the USA. Everything was so strange. My worst fear and frustration was that I could not understand a thing people around me were talking about! I felt so useless and powerless. I wondered if anyone who tried to be nice to me really knew my struggle. Of course, I missed my friends and food in China a lot! I started to regret my decision to be adopted. I felt lonely and I hated the food.

Now as I am looking back, I have no idea how I survived the first few years. It was so hard....

Angel, adopted at age 9 ½

I lived with constant fear in the first few months when I first came to this country. I lived with my new adoptive family, knowing my real age was different from what my new family understood. In China, if you are 14 or above you cannot be adopted. In order for me to have a good family, my orphanage decided to change my age and make me 2 years younger! I knew they did that for my good, but I felt bad, especially when I was put in to a class with all the kids obviously younger than me!

My parents are great people. Their love and kindness finally took away my fear so I told them the secret that has been on my heart like a heavy rock. "We thought you were older, but we love you no matter what!" I now feel so lucky and accepted.

Jeremy, adopted at age 11 ½ (actual 13 ½)

I really did not want to be adopted by a non-Chinese family. But one day, my care taker told me that an American couple wanted to adopt me because they heard about me through their friend. This friend knew me because she volunteered at our orphanage for a few months. So for quite a while I refused to accept my new parents, I fought with them constantly, and I refused to go to school...I am beginning to accept my new life but I miss China very much. My parents are good people and I think I will be okay. It is just very hard.

Grace, adopted at age 10



## Parting Thoughts

It takes a special family to open their doors to an older child. These children have been waiting for so long for a 'forever' family, and many have given up hope. All adoption journeys have their share of joys, challenges, struggles, and triumphs, and the adoption of an older child is no different. The best adoptive parent isn't one with the most experience, expertise, or the best resources. The best adoptive parent is one who is willing, and prepared. That is why we are so thankful for YOU! You are willing not only to consider taking in one of these precious children, but also to take the necessary but difficult first look into what challenges may lay ahead.

We hope this book has provided you with the insight needed to truly prepare to open your home and heart to an older child in need of a family, and a resource to use after your adoption if challenges arise. Our goal in providing this booklet to families has not been to scare families away, but rather to encourage those who are willing to move forward. You can do this! Many families have gone ahead of you, and have shared their experiences to help. With a toolkit in hand, almost any problem can be faced head on, and taken care of quickly before it grows. Our most sincere hope, however, is that you have a smooth adoption and transition with your adopted older child, and that you can enjoy the joys of parenting this special person you come to call your own.

Best wishes as you build your family!

Your CCAI family



## **Additional Resources**

Adoption Parenting: Creating a Toolbox, Building Connections edited by Jean MacLeod and Sheena Macrae

Attaching in Adoption: Practical Tools for Today's Parents by Deborah Gray

Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens by Debbie Riley and John Meeks

The Connected Child by Karyn Purvis, Ph.D., and David Cross, Ph.D.

Our Own: Adopting and Parenting the Older Child by Trish Maskew

The Out of Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder by Carol Kranowitz and Lucy Jane Miller

Parenting Adopted Adolescents by Gregory C. Keck, Ph.D.

Parenting Children Surviving Sexual Abuse by Michael V. Merick, MS, LMSW & Betsy Allen, MA, LMSW

Parenting the Hurt Child by Gregory Keck and Regina M. Kupecky

Parenting your Internationally Adopted Child by Peggy Cogen

Real Parents, Real Children by Holly van Fulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb

The Waiting Child: How the faith and love of one orphan saved the life of another by Cindy Champnella

Toddler Adoption: the Weaver's Craft by Mary Hopkins-Best

## Web Resources

[www.olderchildadoption.com](http://www.olderchildadoption.com)

Articles on all aspects of adopting an older child.

Child Welfare Information Gateway @

[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_abused/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_abused/index.cfm)

A guide for parents of sexually abused foster and adopted children.

<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/>

A collection of articles on all aspects of adoptive parenting.

<http://www.child.tcu.edu/>

Web based videos and other resources on working with children with attachment struggles.

[www.tapestrybooks.com](http://www.tapestrybooks.com)

A resource of adoption related books.

## Online Training

<http://www.adoptionlearningpartners.org/>

- Adopting the Older Child
- Ain't Misbehavin': Discipline and the Adopted Child
- Becoming your Child's Best Advocate: Help for Adoptive Parents
- Conspicuous Families: Race, Culture, and Adoption
- Finding the Missing Pieces: Helping Adopted Children Cope with Grief and Loss
- The Journey of Attachment
- Let's Talk Adoption: A Lifetime of Family Conversations
- Lifebooks: Creating and Telling Your Child's Story
- Tough Starts Matter series
- We're Home, Now What? for parents of newly adopted school age children

## Personal Resource List

Once home with your child, there may be times you need help or support. Have this list ready before you leave on your adoption trip so that you can easily access those you need for support.

You can always call the following for any questions or support with any issues:

Social worker: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Personal support – your closest family and friends, with whom you can discuss your struggles, challenges, joys, and triumphs without judgment:

Family: \_\_\_\_\_

Friend: \_\_\_\_\_

Other contacts you may need:

Pediatrician: \_\_\_\_\_

Medical specialist: \_\_\_\_\_

Occupational therapist: \_\_\_\_\_

Child/family counselor: \_\_\_\_\_

Adoption support group: \_\_\_\_\_

Translation services: \_\_\_\_\_

School counselor: \_\_\_\_\_





## Planning Ahead

Please read through the following questions and discuss them as a family (as appropriate) to see where you are well prepared and which areas you might need more support. The following page has corresponding thoughts to keep in mind as you consider these questions. We encourage you to discuss these with your social worker or call your agency if there are any questions that are concerning for you as you anticipate adopting an older child.

1. What do we expect this child's reaction to be when we adopt him or her?
2. What level of behavior problems/acting out are we prepared for?
3. What can we plan to do if the child exhibits sexual acting out or significant aggression?
4. How long do we expect the 'settling in' process to take?
5. How have we prepared other children in the home for this adoption?
6. What steps can we take to ensure each family member continues to have their needs met once we introduce a new child to the home?
7. How can we protect the safety of other children during difficult times with the adopted child?
8. If we have young children at home, is adopting an older child for us?
9. What are our options for day care or school for this child?
10. If this child is not ready for school the first year home, what are alternative options?
11. How focused are we as a family on academics? Will we have a difficult time if this child does not excel?
12. What behaviors or actions are we unwilling to manage in the home?
13. How much are we willing and able to put into this child *after* the adoption financially for therapy, care, medical treatments, etc?
14. How do we feel about adoption dissolution and relinquishment? Would this ever be an option for us?
15. What steps are we willing to take now to prevent a relinquishment?

## Planning Ahead Thoughts

Questions 1-4: We encourage families to remember that some children are thrilled with the adoption; others barely go along with it. In any case, expect that an older child may have significant, or even troubling, behaviors after adoption. Expect aggression, breaking objects, stubbornness, and defiance, and be prepared should the child have sexual behaviors as well. Many families think the child should be over the problems within a few months of being home—however, expect the fourth month to be the worst, and for it to take a full year before your child starts to adapt to the behaviors you want. Also, prepare for it to take years before your child attaches to you.

Questions 5-8: Adoption is exciting, but it takes a toll on families. Prepare now how you can protect your existing relationships so that when things are strained with the adoption, you know what to do. Seriously consider the impact of adopting an older child on your other children. We often strongly suggest families with young children in the home avoid adopting a much older child, simply because of the amount of support and care these children need and because their difficult behaviors can adversely affect your other children.

Questions 9-11: Families often expect their child to be in school much of the day. Some children do well with this, others don't. Explore your options so you know what is available before you need it. Also consider if you are willing to sit in class with the child, keep them home, or home school if your child can't handle school during the first year.

Questions 12-15: Research shows that adoptions end in disruption in about 10% of adoptions of younger children, and up to 24% in preteen-teenaged children. The reason is almost always that the family was not prepared for the amount of support the children needed. The best way to avoid disruption is to know that it happens, and prepare now to make it not be an option for your family. Know what it will take to handle this child, and what to do if you are at your breaking point. Have realistic expectations, even if that means your family and life take a drastic change to accommodate this child. That is often what it takes—and is a price not every family is willing to pay.

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