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Preparing Children for the Adoption of a Sibling: Recommendations for Families Considering Intercountry Adoption

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When considering an adoption, you may wonder how the adoption of another child is going to affect your other children in the home. There are many factors – including your children’s ages, and their thoughts about having another sibling – that will have an impact on how they feel. In addition, your children will be affected by how your family manages its resources, time, schedules, and commitments.

The tools you need to prepare your children in the home for adoption vary depending on the age and situation of the child your family plans to adopt. In most instances, young babies are no longer being adopted internationally, so an internationally adopted child is often a child who is at least two years old. This child may have special needs, will have likely been in an orphanage, and is also likely to have experienced some trauma.¹

Preparing yourselves and your children for the arrival of a child who may have attachment issues and medical needs, and who does not speak English, requires you to be well prepared to understand and meet the child’s needs. As much as everyone wants to be excited about the arrival of a new child, the reality is that there will most likely be real challenges.

¹ For more intercountry adoption information and statistics, see: http://adoption.state.gov/about_us/statistics.php



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Not only do you need to be open and knowledgeable about these challenges – your other children should be as well, to a level that is appropriate to their age and ability to understand.

When and what should your children know about a possible future adoption?

Share with your children—of all ages—that you are considering adoption once the discussion becomes serious and you begin to talk on the phone or schedule meetings with an adoption agency. Oftentimes children may sense that something big is happening, even before you mention it. Secrets can have negative associations, so be sure that your children do not receive the impression that adoption is something that ought to be hidden.

Part of preparing yourselves and any other children in your home for the arrival of another child via intercountry adoption requires an explanation about the uncertain time frame. There are often delays in intercountry adoptions, and you will not know exactly when the new child will arrive. Preschool-aged children have little concept of time. Telling your four-year-old that you will be traveling in April of next year to adopt a child will not make sense to him. Your family discussions about adoption should include information about the process of adoption rather than a specific timeline regarding the child's homecoming. (In fact, this is good advice when sharing your adoption plans with other family and friends as well—keep the timeframe open-ended.)

In your discussions with your children, be sure to tell them about the homestudy process, the required paperwork (expect little interest in this area), and the travel involved. Start reading some adoption-friendly children's books, such as *A Mother for Choco* (by Keiko Kasza) and *One Wonderful You* (by Francis Portnoy). You and your children can talk about what they expect the new child to look like, and some of what he or she may be experiencing in the orphanage or foster home.

How can you involve your children in the adoption process?

Your children can also help you start a scrapbook for your new child. By putting together this scrapbook, including photos and drawings of your family members, your home and town, the activities you enjoy, and some of your favorite places to visit, you and your children can begin the dialogue of how the new child will be welcomed and integrated into your family activities.

If it is possible to Skype with the child to be adopted, include your children in part of the Skype phone call. Language may be barrier, so the conversations

could be brief. Your children could show the child pictures, demonstrate a simple game, or sing a song.

One parent said that her school-aged daughter was involved in nearly every adoption-related email. She was an only child, so her world was going to drastically change with the adoption, and her parents wanted to make sure she felt like she was part of the process.

As you begin talking to your children about your adoption plans, do listen to their feedback. It is important to know how they feel about having another brother or sister. However, it should be clear that they are not part of the ultimate decision to adopt—adoption is an adult decision.

For example, if your daughter is apprehensive about having to share her room, her toys, or your attention with another child, it shows that she is thinking ahead. Address her concerns and be reassuring, but be realistic, too. First, tell her that you are pleased that she can be open with you about having to share with another. Ask her what she is most comfortable sharing and what she feels needs to be hers exclusively. Every child needs to feel that there are some things that are hers alone. Share also with your daughter that there will be special items that belong *only* to the new child.

Discuss how your time may be spent caring for the new child and bringing him to medical appointments. Point out which activities *you* will also be giving up or limiting once another child is in your home. This is also a good time to have a reality check with yourself: Are you spending enough time with your kids now? Are you really “checked in” with them, or do you find that you are distracted while talking with them? Begin now to eliminate certain outside distractions and activities so that you can have more focused time with all of your children.

Some of your child’s concerns may seem selfish or troubling to you –he may say, for example, that he doesn’t want you to adopt a child who looks different from the rest of the family or one who might have a physical limitation or disability. Try to remember that elementary- and middle school-aged children can be especially sensitive about looking or feeling different from their peers. They may fear being embarrassed in front of strangers or teased by their friends. As parents, make sure your children feel comfortable expressing such concerns and recognize that how you respond will determine whether they are able to share their feelings in the future. Never shame your children and always acknowledge their feelings, even if you believe they are based on false notions or standards that you do not share. Just because you think your teenaged son is embarrassed by just about everything your family does is no reason to dismiss his concerns regarding a new sibling.

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Siblings and parents embarrass each other sometimes. Discuss with your kids how they already respond to such incidents, and think of ways to help the whole family adjust to difficult situations or the curiosity or rudeness of strangers. If, for example, your new child will have a cleft palate, discuss with your son or daughter what others may say and how this would make them feel. Ask them to imagine that another existing family member had an illness or injury that was noticeable, and how they would react to that situation. Talk about ways they could respond to friends and others who made unkind comments—especially within earshot of the new child.

Many children do not fear the arrival of another child, and instead view the child to be adopted as a new playmate. One mother said, “I tried to prepare my daughter Gracie for the ‘worst’ personality: [a new sibling] who loves to read and study and hates to play!” In reality, she adds, both girls are good friends and love to play together.

As specific situations arise prior to the adoption, you can discuss how they might be different with the addition of a new child. As you put your child to bed with a story, for example, you could say, “And when your new brother arrives, we will be reading to him, too.”

How should you begin educating yourselves and your children about adoption?

When you begin the adoption process, you will probably have to wait for the referral of a child, so you will not necessarily know the child’s age, gender, or medical and developmental history. The initial conversations you have with your children about their newly adopted sibling will most likely be rather general because of the limited information you will have.

Once you know more about the child you are committed to adopting and his possible needs, share this information with your children. Just as you must educate yourself about adoption and possible issues you might face, your children will also need to be prepared and given some realistic expectations about the new child’s needs.

If you have older children, include them in some of your adoption preparation and coursework. Share with your children information from the online courses and websites you are looking at. If you are taking a class, consider allowing your children to attend with you—the instructor can let you know if the content is appropriate for children at various ages.

What do you tell your children when identifying a child to adopt?

If you adopt via a program that requires you to identify a child, do not undertake this step with your children—they may want to adopt every child they see! Again, adoption is an adult decision. Keep discussions with your children open, but specific decisions may need to be kept between you and your spouse.

Share information with your children on a need-to-know basis. For example, if you are considering the adoption of a specific child with special needs but are awaiting a doctor's report, this may make your children feel that if they had a certain physical limitation, they might not have been welcomed in your family. Parents have said this has been difficult to share with their other children, as the children may feel you are “rejecting” a child. If your children are old enough to know what is happening, explain to them that you want to provide a child that needs a family with the best possible resources. Be very careful what you say to your children, and think about how the acceptance of one child versus another may “sound” to them. Be very clear that if a child has an unknown medical or other issue upon arrival in your home, this new child will still be loved and accepted.

You want to avoid the appearance of secrecy, so before you begin to take steps to identify a child, tell your children a little about the type of child you are seeking to adopt. For example, you might say, “We would like to adopt a three-year-old girl, but we may also consider a sibling group of a boy and girl. Some children have special medical needs, so we are open to adopting a child who can be well cared for by the doctors in our area.”

Once you have clearly committed to a child, you may want to do as one family did: they all sat down together to watch a video about him.

How much should you share about the adopted child's history?

Certain facts related to an adopted child's medical needs might need to be explained to your children. If you have young preschool-aged children, share the picture of the child you plan to adopt, along with some basic biographical information. If you have older children, you can share photos and more detailed information when you receive the referral.

Every adopted child has a history before arriving in the family's home. Certain details may not be appropriate to share. If you feel that some information is too sensitive, and your other children might repeat it to others, you may choose not disclose it to them. Every child has a right to her own history, and if, when, and how it is fully shared with others.

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Because adopted children often have experienced abuse, including sexual abuse, how much you share with your other children should be based instead on how much you need to share. If you know or have reason to believe that the child entering your home has been sexually abused or may have the potential to act out as a result of this abuse, then you may need to explain to your other children that some children who have had difficult experiences sometimes express their feelings in certain ways. One adoptive mother, who adopted a six-year-old child, “Mia,” after an intercountry adoption disruption, was told by Mia’s first adoptive mother that Mia masturbated constantly. Because the new child would be sharing a room with her new big sister, “Maggie,” her mother told Maggie—and Maggie only—that if this occurred, she could come and tell her parents, and they would handle the situation.

The most important thing is that your children feel comfortable talking to you if a situation makes them uneasy. You may need to explain that, at first, the new child will need to be watched all the time by Mom and Dad to make sure she is all right. Any newly adopted child, whether or not she has experienced abuse, may still need constant supervision to feel comfortable and receive guidance if any inappropriate behavior—such as hitting or biting—occurs and needs addressing.

What if your other children are adopted?

If you have other children who are adopted, they may have more questions about their own adoptions. New feelings may surface as your family prepares to adopt another child. Perhaps your child was adopted domestically and receives pictures and letters from his birth family. You will need to let your child know that the new child also has a birthmother (and birthfather), but the circumstances for making the adoption plan may be different. There may be limited contact between birthparents or previous caregivers—or none at all if the child has no living or known family.

Your children at home—whether adopted or not—may not understand the concepts of abandonment, orphanage life, foster homes, or having to wait for an adoptive family. Explain how the child waiting to be adopted might feel, living in an orphanage or in foster care. Foster empathy for the new child, but do not overburden your children—especially very young children—with lots of information about how their to-be-adopted sibling might be cold or hungry or lonely or ill. You can simply explain that the child may not have all the luxuries your children at home do, that he may have different medical needs, or that his diet is quite different.

How do you prepare your children for your adoption-related travel?

Your children will most likely be staying home with other relatives or caregivers while you travel overseas to adopt your new child. Make sure these caregivers know your children well. If Grandma only sees your kids a few times a year but will be caring for them while you are away, be sure to schedule a few more visits with her before you travel.

While you are away, if your children will be cared for in your home, arrange for your children to visit with friends; this will give their caregivers a much-needed break while keeping your children with people familiar to them.

How much extra help will you need?

Most friends and family will want to come by to see the new child once you are ready for visitors. Be specific when others offer their help. You might suggest that someone take your children on some outings to give you more time with your new child. Extra meals or helping with some light housework are always appreciated.

Preparing for the adoption of another child or a sibling group means preparing yourselves as parents to meet the additional needs of *all* of your children—without forgetting your own needs. Make sure that your schedule is as open as possible, and make time for yourself as well as time for just you and your spouse. Enlist the help of family members—especially during the transition period.

What if you are adopting out of “birth order”?

Families often ask about adopting out of the “birth order,” and if this will have a negative impact on the child who may no longer be the oldest or youngest. If you have one child at home and then adopt a sibling group, you also need to consider how this could overwhelm the one who used to be the “only child.”

There are no right or wrong answers for families considering these sorts of changes, as all children and families are different. As parents, you need to think critically and carefully consider what will work best for your family.

What will the adjustment be like once your adopted child is home?

You may find that your new child adjusts well—in my experience, about one-third of children do. Or you may find that your child is part of the

one-third who have some adjustment issues but eventually transition well. Yours could also be among the one-third of children who have more serious emotional and behavioral problems.

As adoptive parents, you cannot ever be *fully* prepared for the unknown, and so it is unrealistic to expect that you can fully prepare your other children for the arrival and transition of a new adopted sibling. Even when a newborn child enters the family, there are still adjustments and challenges that cannot be foreseen, even though an infant's behavior is fairly predictable.

Remember that your newly adopted child might not have gotten to be a “baby,” with the full attention of his or her parents. Allow this new child to be babied and cuddled. They might find new places, people, and situations quite overwhelming, especially at first – so no trips to Chuck E. Cheese for a while. If your other children want to go to the mall, let someone else take them.

Even if your adopted child is older and appears to be more independent, he will still need lots of your attention. But so will all of your other children. Your other children, who probably did not travel with you, will have missed you while you were abroad. This is an exhausting time for many families, so get help if you need it, relax your standards, and curtail your activities.

What outside resources will we need?

The most important factor once you are home is bonding as a family. Some newly adopted children will need various therapies, such as speech and occupational. You may feel that you need to get your newly adopted child medically screened and up-to-date on immunizations the first week home. If at all possible, and when medically feasible, try to delay any outside activities and visits to professionals. Wait about two weeks to one month to visit the doctor unless you must go sooner. During this time, children with developmental delays will often do some serious “catching up.”

If you find that your new child and your other children are having adjustment issues, first consider your schedule. Is it getting too full? Are one or both parents too busy?

If you are still struggling, first call your placing or homestudy agency for suggestions. They should already have given you information about local resources, and can point you towards more. Your agency staff members deal with many adoptive families, so they often see patterns in adjustment issues and can provide some practical advice.

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If adjustment problems are more serious, your child can be evaluated. The problems could range from simple medical needs to more complex issues such as sensory processing problems. Your child may have food issues that can be resolved with menu planning, or your child's situation may be so challenging that she may need intervention from a feeding specialist.

Remember, if your newly adopted child is having any adjustment issues, your whole family will be affected. Seek the necessary support early, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

Conclusion

There are many dynamics in your family, and many relationships to be considered before adopting. The stories families share about how they prepared their children in the home for another child vary so widely because each family is so different. There are unpredictable factors in any adoption, but some strategies and plans can be put into place ahead of time so that the addition of another child to your family can be as well managed as possible, even if the transition is not as smooth as you'd hoped.

Every adoption starts with education – for both you and your children. Talk frequently about the adoption to come. Discuss what it will be like to bring a new child into your home. Make a list of some of the good things about having another brother or sister and another list of some of the challenges. These shared moments of discussion can bring you all closer and help your children feel that they are truly part of the adoption process.

Adoption can add many new challenges and dimensions that are not normally experienced by biological families. In addition, the new child could have emotional issues that can profoundly impact all members of the family. Although adoption can be enormously rewarding for both parents and children, there could be additional heartache if a child's emotional problems negatively affect the other children in the home. Adoptive families must be well prepared and educated, willing to continue learning, and willing to change themselves and their own family dynamics to ensure that all members of the family adjust and thrive after an adoption.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Beauvais-Godwin, the adoptive mother of two daughters, has been involved with adoptions for more than 24 years. She has directed the SC office of Nightlight (formerly Carolina Hope) for more than 15 years. In addition, she serves as president of the SC Association of Licensed Adoption Agencies, and is also the founder and facilitator of the Carolina Christian Alliance for Orphans. She recently completed her coursework for a graduate degree in professional counseling. Laura, along with her husband, is the co-author of *The Complete Adoption Book*. In 2005, the SC legislature awarded her the South Carolina Woman of Achievement Award for her work in adoption.



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