

# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

Chuck Johnson, *editor*  
Megan Lestino, *editor*

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## Adoption Camps: A Primer for Families

BY ERIN BAYLES AND SARAH ALGER

*“The camps are a lot of fun for me because I grew up in a pretty small town where there was not a huge Asian population, so it was a very special experience to get together with so many other Asian kids who were also adopted.”*

—Nora Burgess, reminiscing about her experiences at adoption culture camps

### Introduction

**A**fter being adopted from China as an infant, Nora Burgess and her mother, Phebe, attended two different culture camps. When Nora was in preschool they attended a three-day camp in Maine, run by Families with Children from China, where they met other families with adopted children from China. Year later, they went to another camp held at a YMCA facility in Asheville, North Carolina. Nora recalled that the camps heightened her interest in Chinese culture, as “they covered so many different topics: dance, singing, calligraphy, traditional children’s games, cooking, speaking, etc.” One special memory stuck with her: the camp counselors would perform traditional Chinese stories and dances and encourage the children to join in. Her mother Phebe’s favorite memory was the closing ceremony, which included a Dragon parade and performances by the children.



National Council  
For Adoption

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

Now twenty-one years old, Nora continues to learn about her Chinese heritage through her studies at college. Overall, she said, she was glad her mother went with her to the culture camps, as they offered extended resources on her birth culture and supplemented her family's own exploration in a fun, memorable way.

## Adoption-Focused Camps

Adoption-focused camps exist in a variety of different forms. Culture camps can help adopted children experience and learn about their birth culture. There are also camps that connect individuals with similar experiences, including those from foster care, those adopted domestically as infants, and those adopted via intercountry adoption. Family and healing camps are devoted to addressing past trauma and encouraging attachment and bonding.

Adoption-focused day camps and sleep-away camps are available throughout the U.S. and around the world. There are many things to consider when determining which camp is the best fit for a particular child or family. Generally, prices range from \$20 to \$50 per day to several hundred dollars for overnight camps.<sup>1</sup>

Phebe's adoption agency recommended that she teach her daughter about her heritage as she grew older. This led her to join a group of parents who had also adopted girls from China, where she learned about Chinese culture camps for families. These camps are primarily run by adoption agencies, but there are also other organizations that offer camps.

Make sure to investigate the credentials of the professionals providing the camp experience. The camp should be run by properly trained and licensed professionals with expertise in the area of focus, whether it be culture, attachment, or identity formation. While there has been limited research on the effectiveness and impact of adoption-focused camps, many past attendees report positive experiences, saying these camps have provided them with support and community and connected them to networks of people who have similar experiences.<sup>2</sup> These camps can help adopted youth feel less isolated through connection with others who have stories like theirs, and provide additional tools to help them process, accept, and celebrate aspects of their own unique adoption stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Solchany, J. "Is Culture Camp for Us?" Adoptive Families Magazine, no date given. Retrieved online at: <https://www.adoptivefamilies.com/parenting/culture-camp/> (Subscription required.)

<sup>2</sup> Delale-O'Connor, L. "Culture Goes to Camp." Contexts, (10)1, 60-61. 2011.

## Seven Developmental Experiences Available in Camp Settings

According to the American Camp Association, the best camps do not attempt to provide cookie-cutter solutions to what kids need. Instead, great camps understand that the factors that make children resilient are cumulative. One experience contributes to others, expanding a child's psychosocial resources. In practice, this means camps need to offer children healthy amounts of some or all of the following seven experiences:<sup>3</sup>

1. *New relationships* – not just with peers, but with trusted adults other than children's parents. These new relationships teach children social skills to cope with new people and new situations. A cabin full of new kids gives them a chance to play both leader and follower, depending on the activity.
2. *A powerful sense of identity* that helps children feel confident and gives them something genuine to like about themselves. The camp experience not only helps the child discover what they can do, it also provides them with an audience that shows appreciation. Identities that fortify a child during times of transition and crisis are those that have been acknowledged by others as positive and powerful.
3. *Helping children feel in control of their lives*, as children who experience themselves as competent will be better problem-solvers in new situations long after their laundry is cleaned and the smell of the campfire is forgotten. A child who has some say over daily activities at a camp and learns to fix problems when they happen (e.g., cleaning up a mess when a group of campers get too rowdy) will take home a view of the world as manageable.
4. *Fair treatment for all* – The wonderful thing about camp is that every child starts in a fresh group of peers without all the baggage they might carry from home or school. At camp, kids can find new opportunities to just be themselves, valued for who they are. The goal is to strive not only for equality, but also a spirit of equity, in which each child receives that which they individually need in order to feel valued.
5. *What they need to develop physically* – Ideally, fresh air, exercise, a balance between routine and unstructured time, and all the good food their bodies need. Not that s'mores don't have a place at the

<sup>3</sup> Ungar, Michael. "Camps Help Make Children Resilient." *Camping Magazine*, 2012. Retrieved online at: <http://www.acacamps.org/resource-library/camping-magazine/camps-help-make-children-resilient>

campfire, but a good camp is also about helping children find healthier lifestyles. We know that early experiences of exposure to risk, and poor health resulting from too little exercise when young, have long-term consequences for the child's healthy development.

6. *A chance to feel like they belong* through all those goofy chants and team songs, the sense of common purpose and the attachment to the identity that camps promote, and new friendships. The camp community experience can offer children a sense of being rooted. For children who have faced trauma or other high-risk environments, the sense of belonging to a set of peers and the institution of the camp itself can be a buffer against future feelings of isolation that might contribute to other risky or problem behaviors.
7. *A better sense of their culture*, because even camps without an explicit cultural focus can encourage children to think about their interests, values, and everyday practices and share their lives and experiences with others.

A camp can be an excellent place for personal development, and this can be especially true for children or youth who were adopted. Adopted children might have questions about identity, feelings of isolation, or trauma in their past, and all these issues can be supported and educated on both specifically and experientially in a camp setting.

## Culture Camps and Homeland Tours

Culture camps are held in a variety of locations, usually during the summer when many children are not in school, and provide services to children across the nation. These camps help adopted individuals connect to their birth culture and also bring together children from similar cultures, for whom it may be rare to feel a part of the majority. By helping children feel more comfortable in their own identities, the camps encourage positive development and acceptance of adoption.

Activities may include arts and crafts, skits, trying on clothing, food preparation, and the study of language and customs.<sup>4</sup> For example, a camp specific for Haitian adopted individuals might include activities like making Haitian coleslaw, painting masks, and playing Haitian drums. Camps may also offer an outdoor recreation component in order to encourage bonding and socializing among counselors and participants.

<sup>4</sup> Delale-O'Connor, L. "Culture Goes to Camp." *Contexts*, (10)1, 60-61. 2011.

Parents and siblings are often encouraged to take part as well. There are some camps that invite the entire family to attend, while others may simply ask parents to volunteer.<sup>5</sup> Some allow partial participation through a performance or closing family activity. When Nora got older, Phebe would still attend camp with her, but she would attend different activities specifically for parents – such as talks on bonding, incorporating culture into everyday life, and even adult cooking classes.

International homeland and heritage tours provide another way for internationally adopted people to learn about and gain exposure to their birth country and its culture. Many adoption agencies and travel companies offer these trips for children born all over the world. Homeland tours allow families and adopted individuals to visit their birth country through a comprehensive planned trip, experience the cuisine, see famous landmarks, attend traditional music and arts performances, and sometimes even visit the individual's orphanage or foster family.<sup>6</sup> Phebe and Nora went on a Home Ties tour to China when Nora was nine years old. A social worker who came along would lead a girls' discussion group every night so the girls could share emotions and issues that arose on the trip.

According to Susan Cox, Vice President of Holt International, Holt was the first organization to bring adopted individuals over to the U.S. in the 1950s. Previous Holt CEO David Kim believed children adopted abroad should experience their birth culture, which resulted in him leading the first motherland tour to Korea in the mid-1970s. Past participants have said that the Korean homeland tours allowed them to feel proud of and better understand their heritage. Today many birth culture tours have had great success, and there are many different types of tours for all age groups.

Family tours provide an opportunity for families and non-adopted siblings to join the adopted child on an exploration of their birth culture. Motherland tours are specifically for young adoptees. Couples' tours, first led by Susan Cox in 1983, involve young adoptees and their partners. Offered in celebration of the conception of homeland tours, first-generation tours have brought together the first generation of adopted individuals in the U.S., who are now between the ages of 50-60, to visit their birth country. Social media has made it much easier for adopted individuals to stay connected with each other after the tours, expanding the opportunity for support.

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<sup>5</sup> Lipsher, S. "Staying in Touch With a Far-Off Heritage, Adoptees Learn Korean Culture at Annual Camp." Denver Post, pp. F-04. 27 June 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Adoptive Family Travel. China. 2016. Retrieved online at: <http://www.adoptivfamilytravel.com/asia/china/>

## Transracial Camps

It is common for intercountry and foster care adoptions to result in the formation of transracial families. Transracial adoption camps can provide a safe community for families to access resources and support. Children and families engage in activities that encourage positive identity development, the building of strong self-esteem, and the discussion of race and transracial adoption. These camps include similar recreational and educational activities as culture camps, but also focus on providing a community to promote racial justice and equity. Some camps will even invite keynote speakers who have personal experiences with transracial adoption. They provide transracial families an opportunity to build a support network and help adopted individuals understand the importance of racial identity.<sup>7</sup>

## Adoption Experience Programs

Adopted children, youth, and adults all have unique stories with many common threads, including the original separation from their birth families. Questions about birth parents, identity, and abandonment are among the most common thoughts specific to adopted children, but some are hesitant to ask adoptive parents these questions for a variety of reasons. While it's important for adoptive parents to help adopted children feel comfortable talking about their adoption within the family, camps designed specifically for adopted kids can be an excellent supplemental resource and give these kids another safe place – with those who have common experiences – to ask those hard questions.

Because many counselors at these adoption experience camps are also adopted, the campers will also have like role models they can look up to, ask questions of, and share their feelings with. One of the best aspects of the adoption experience programs is that these camps are designed to be both fun and meaningful, providing the traditional summer camp experience along with adoption-specific programming. In addition to traditional camp activities such as swimming, hiking, and arts and crafts, there are also unique events like sharing adoption stories over the campfire.

Across the country, there are also shorter day camps or seminar versions of camp that share the same purpose of creating a safe space for adopted children. These camps might be better suited for children who fear the

<sup>7</sup> Pact, An Adoption Alliance. Pact Family Camp. Retrieved online at: [https://www.pactadopt.org/adoptive/services/education/pact\\_camp.html](https://www.pactadopt.org/adoptive/services/education/pact_camp.html)

separation or are otherwise not ready for a sleep-away camp. They may also be more affordable because they do not last as long. On the other hand, the longer experience provided by the sleep-away camps offers more time to build relationships with other campers and counselors. The trust created by the experience of the longer camp time can lead to more comfort and opportunities to share.

## Family and Healing Camps (Attachment and Bonding)

For children that experienced abuse, neglect, abandonment, family violence, parental substance abuse or other trauma, family and healing camps may be helpful. Attachment camps focus on encouraging the necessary bonds for families to thrive. They usually involve the whole family, including the child, adoptive parents, and sometimes both biological and adoptive siblings. The goal is to find hope and create a healing environment away from the distractions and stressors of everyday life. The skills learned at the camps – which include exercises to build honesty and trust – can then be taken back and applied to everyday life.

One well known and renowned attachment and bonding camp is the Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) Therapeutic Camp. TBRI is a multidimensional approach to trauma-informed intervention designed by the Institute of Child Development at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas. By helping caregivers understand what should have happened in early development, TBRI principles guide children and youth back to their natural developmental trajectory. During camp, which almost always include the parent(s) for at least a portion, children are immersed in a sensory- and attachment-rich environment and led in activities that help them gain the skills necessary to form meaningful relationships. It consists of three sets of harmonious principles, outlined as follows:

### TBRI® Connecting Principles

- Connecting Principles help children build trust and meaningful relationships. These include:
  - Engagement Strategies, which connect with children nonverbally, such as with eye contact, behavior matching, and playful engagement.
  - Mindfulness Strategies, which involve parents and caregivers being aware of what they bring to interactions with their children, such as being conscious of their own relationship histories.

## TBRI® Empowering Principles

- Empowering Principles help children learn important skills like self-regulation. There are two types of Empowering strategies:
  - Physiological Strategies, which focus on the internal physical needs of the child. These include things like hydration, blood sugar, and sensory needs.
  - Ecological Strategies, which focus on the child's external environment and guide children toward learning self-regulation skills. Ecological Strategies include things like transitions, scaffolding (guided support appropriate to a child's level that facilitates learning), and daily rituals.

## TBRI® Correcting Principles

- Correcting Principles help children learn behavioral and social competence so that they can better navigate the social world they live in. Correcting Principles include:
  - Proactive Strategies, which are designed to teach social skills to children during calm times.
  - Responsive Strategies, which provide caregivers with tools for responding to challenging behavior from children.<sup>8</sup>

## Recreational Therapy Camp

Many camps for adopted individuals incorporate some type of recreational component to enhance socialization through physical activities. However, some specialized camps also focus on using recreation as a therapeutic resource to help children who may be struggling with separation, loss, abandonment, or other trauma. Programming for recreational therapy can include traditional camping activities like canoeing, swimming, ropes courses, water games, campfires, and other experiential-based initiatives. This type of therapy helps children boost their confidence and self-esteem, improve their social skills, and build their sense of independence.

There are also camps that use Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), also known as Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), to encourage attachment and help children make positive behavior changes.<sup>9</sup> Equine and other recreational therapy camps can be a wonderful way for adopted individuals and families to participate in therapeutic, connecting outdoor activities.

<sup>8</sup> Purvis, K.B., Cross, D.R., Dansereau, D.F., & Parris, S.R. "Trust-based relational intervention (TBRI): A systematic approach to complex developmental trauma." *Child & Youth Services*, 34(4), 1-28. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Harmony Family Center. The Barn (Equine Therapy). Retrieved online at: <http://harmonyfamilycenter.org/counseling-programs/the-barn-eap/>

## Camps for Reuniting Biological Siblings

Some children, often those living in or adopted from foster care, might be living apart from their biological siblings. Siblings may have been adopted by several different families located in different cities or even different states. It's normal for birth siblings to be interested in and want a relationship with one another. For some, curiosity about siblings is even stronger than curiosity about birth parents.

Several new camps now focus on reconnecting foster and adopted youth with siblings from whom they've been separated via foster care and adoption. In some cases, that can mean reuniting siblings that have been apart for several years while they were stuck in the foster care system. Typically, these week-long camps create a safe space to create childhood memories together – memories they might not have due to living in separate homes. They may be among the few opportunities these children have to be together while they are still young.

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## Conclusion

Camps specifically designed for adopted individuals provide families and children with post-adoption opportunities that encourage healthy physical, mental, and social development. For many children, these camps may be the only time they are surrounded by other adopted individuals with shared experiences. An adopted child might feel like part of the majority for the duration of the camp in ways they may not in their day-to-day lives. These camps can also provide essential hands-on experiences for children to learn about their birth culture and talk frankly about adoption. At the same time, adoptive parents can find supportive peers and gain information.

While adoption-focused camps can provide a wonderful environment to help educate, heal, support, and entertain adopted children, they are not necessarily for everyone. And they can be difficult for families to access, even though there are camps all over the U.S. – it may be hard to locate one that is affordable and convenient.

Camps can never replace parenting, which for adoptive parents should include the integration of a child's heritage and culture into the life of the family. At home, many adopted children will still have to face the reality of racism and prejudice. Camps can help families educate themselves to better address these issues. But in some cases, the camp may not be

specific enough for the child in question – for example, the educational component in a camp on Latin American culture may lack specificity, or generalize in a way that does not actually help a given child better understand their specific country or culture of origin. In particular, many countries that send only a small number of children abroad for adoption may not be represented at culture camps.

There are hundreds of adoption-focused camps across the country. The easiest way to find one might be a simple web search, but parents can also consult their local adoption agencies and see if they have resources on relevant camps. Camp can be a great experience, but like every child, each camp is unique, and it may take work and trial and error to find one that helps a particular child thrive.

## Additional Web Resources

- A list of several adoption camps across the country: <http://camps.adoption.com>
- Camp Clio: <http://campclio.org>
- EVOLVE summer camps: <http://evolveservices.org/summer-camps>
- Pact Family Camp: [https://www.pactadopt.org/adoptive/services/education/pact\\_camp.html](https://www.pactadopt.org/adoptive/services/education/pact_camp.html)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway: Finding and Using Postadoption Services: [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f\\_postadoption.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_postadoption.pdf)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Erin Bayles has been with NCFA since August 2013 and is currently the Program Associate for Public Policy and Education. Erin graduated from American University with a dual Bachelor's degree in international relations and behavioral psychology. She plans on pursuing a law degree and working in the area of intercountry adoption law and policy.

Sarah Alger is the Summer 2016 Agency Services and Education Intern at NCFA. She is currently studying Public Health with a focus on the socio-cultural context at Elon University. Sarah has a personal interest in adoption and intends to work on the global health scene in her future career.



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