

Adopting an Older Child

by Susan Hall (reprinted with permission – March, 2007)

DO YOUR RESEARCH! Which actually means several things.

1 -- Be sure you can trust your agency & the facilitator who is placing this child. Are you able to ask questions? Has the child been seen by an American with the agency? (I ask because sometimes people look with a different "eye" when they come from different cultural backgrounds.) Do you know if the child actually WANTS to be adopted & leave the country? If the answer is yes, do you have any idea what she thinks this means. Do you have ANY questions about what the information you have means or who has provided it or where it came from? What kinds of clues do you have regarding it's accuracy? Realistically, you need to admit that placing the child for international adoption means wherever she is now no longer deals with her. It is not uncommon for both minor & major details to be left unsaid in an effort to place older children.

2 -- What do you know about "previous life" for this child? Has she been part of a family? For how long? Any clues about the family situation/s? Children who have some clear idea of the POSITIVE aspects of family will make a better adjustment. Even so, the child is likely to have "taken care of herself" in some form for quite some time & that may make adjustment to family difficult.

3 -- What do you know about education for this child? Children who reach "older" ages with no formal education find life VERY difficult (& sometimes impossible) when confronted with the American educational system & on into the work situations. It is a whole combination of things beyond language skills & speaking English. US schools are not really prepared to help ESL kids -- they are absolutely not prepared to help kids who have never been to school & lack both cultural/language knowledge & the knowledge of how to learn. Is it fair to the child or the school system to drop these children in & assume they will "make up" for lost time? Are you prepared for the DAILY struggle of getting an appropriate education for the child? Some of that was "editorial" comment, but you DO need to anticipate some problems with education & more of them if the child has had little or no formal education in China.

4 -- What do you know about "personality" for this child? What sort of things does she LIKE to do? What are her wishes, hopes & dreams? Can you actually get any of this info in a reliable way? How does what you know fit into your family? Are you willing to become a "soccer mom" or whatever when an activity no one else in your family participates in calls to this child?

5 -- Do you have other children? Look closely at what adding this child to your home will do to/for/with them. In the same way that a 9 year old in China cannot make a commitment to adoption with any real understanding, neither can the siblings waiting in the US. Do the siblings expect an "instant" playmate? It won't happen. Have you considered that the adjustment may be as hard (or even harder) on the kids you already have as on the newly adopted child? What about birth-order? Keeping that is extremely important to some families, less so to others. If you are adding a child out of birth-order, are both you & your children aware of some of the ramifications?

6 -- Do your reading! Look for every available bit of material on adopting older children. ONE book to look at is Trish Maskews "Our Own: Adopting & Parenting the Older Child" which is really a book by parents for parents. The people interviewed view older child adoption in a pretty positive light, but are also realistic about the challenges. Along the same lines, look for an internet list.

There used to be an Older Child list for parents adopting older children. I'm no longer part of that list, but suspect it is still out there & would prove a valuable resource for you.

7 -- Why are you doing this? Don't answer to me! All I'm asking is that you CLOSELY evaluate your own motives. Older child adoption means so very much more than "no diapers." (Which, unfortunately, is how some look at it.) You will be bringing a child with personality, morals, values, religion or lack of, world view, and more into your home. How will you feel/cope if they are in conflict with your own? What if the child doesn't like YOU? This child will no doubt be a "big toddler" for months & perhaps years. Knowledge you & your family take for granted will be totally unknown to this child. OTOH she may come knowing more about cooking & cleaning & self-care than most American children her age. Older child adoption under the best of circumstances must not be taken lightly! It will not be easy!

8 -- What are your local resources? Do you have qualified help for attachment disorders? ESL? A cultural/ethnic community to draw from? What else is available?

9 -- Consider that some would say this child should NOT be adopted. Some would suggest that taking her from her culture & her language at this age will be entirely too difficult & *may* scar her further. Some would say the "subtractive language" factor and all the American cultural knowledge she does not have are too difficult to learn at this age. Some would say an international adoption placement should NOT be considered in any way, shape, or form. Does this child touch you enough to help her some other way & within China?

10 -- Are you willing to examine EVERY rule your family operates by & evaluate it based on the whole new family constellation you have become? Are you willing to change rules on a regular basis to accommodate your changing family? Are you even aware of all the rules your family run on? (I ask this because we certainly were not.)

11 -- I don't know what the evidence is about special needs is but my experience as a teacher was that special needs complicated social life for most kids, at least in the initial adjustment to school. In talking about a child with burns I think it would be important to know EXACTLY how she came by them & how she is/has adjusted in her present situation. Is she receiving counseling? Is she angry? I do not want to be harsh but you DO need to be more than realistic about the entire situation. Many people reject the possibility of adopting older American kids out of foster care because they feel "the system" has "damaged" the children too badly for "real" family living. IF this is a concern, please consider that life in China & the abrupt change to the US & all the things you do not know about this child *may* have done the same thing in a different way.

Adopting a child over 6 comes with an entire litany of "problems" that few agencies prepare parents for. For many families these are overcome & within a couple of years family is family for all concerned -- but this is not always the case. I've adopted an older child internationally. I view our experience as largely positive -- but there has been, & continues to be, some VERY hard work involved for all of us. The experience is NOT for everyone -- but it CAN be wonderful. The important part is that you go into it with lots & lots of knowledge about what is possible, both the good & the bad.

(Susan: Mom to 3 teens. My oldest son, off to college this week, a birth child. My daughter, 16, adopted from Korea as an infant. My youngest son, 14, adopted from Vietnam at 8.)