

International Adoption:

Broadening How We Build Families

by Leah Bloom, MSMFT

Stories about international adoption are everywhere. From the media's very public coverage of celebrities' adoptions to the private experiences of close friends and family members, international adoption is stretching our traditional notions of what constitutes the contemporary "American family."

In 2008, 17,438 children were adopted internationally by American parents, according to data from the U.S. Department of State. Guatemala led the way with the most number of children adopted in 2008, followed in order by China, Russia, Ethiopia, Korea, Vietnam, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, India, and Columbia (*Adoptive Families*, February 2009, p. 14).

Parents who choose to bring a child into their family through international adoption experience far-reaching impacts, because they must both negotiate the usual tasks of parenting while also meeting the specific cultural and social challenges presented by adoption. This article will provide a brief description of the process of international adoption, and will also summarize results of

research studies which identify factors associated with healthy family development.

Beginning the journey toward international adoption

Once prospective parents decide to adopt internationally, they must choose a country from which to adopt. For many parents, this is a difficult choice – not only do countries differ in their culture, history, and socioeconomic context, but they also vary widely in terms of their adoption policies, regulations, age of children eligible for adoption, and parental requirements. International law (the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption) also governs the legal process of adoption by protecting the rights of children, adoptive parents, and birthparents; safeguarding children against abduction, sale, or trafficking; and ensuring that adoption is in the best interests of child.

As parents begin to educate themselves about the process of adoption, it is important they consider the specific cultural and homeland traditions the child will bring into their family. It is extremely beneficial if family and friends are open, inquisitive, and supportive of this process as well. Friends and family can show their support by asking questions in a curious way, listening openly, doing independent research, and encouraging the prospective parents to share their thoughts and feelings.

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Placement: Traveling to the child's homeland

Many countries currently require parents to travel to the country to complete the adoption. Some countries require multiple visits, thereby giving parents time to bond with their child and also explore their child's homeland. In most cases, the "placement," or moment the child is placed with the family, occurs on one such trip.

As parents visit their child's homeland, it is useful if they begin collecting local art, crafts, and mementoes to bring home. This helps expand the family's multicultural identity, and also helps the child foster an identity as an international (and perhaps interracial) adoptee. Because children adopted internationally are often a complex mixture of various identities, it is important that they feel free to explore the various facets of their identity. Allowing children to demonstrate pride in their ethnic heritage by displaying artifacts around the home is just one way to support this exploration.

Collecting items with personal meaning to the child and family is another way to commemorate the child's special heritage. Many families choose to create a book, photo album, or memory box of their journey. Items such as a baby formula container, blanket, or the outfit worn at placement can all be preserved and used to supplement the narrative of the child's adoption story.

Bringing home baby

After the child is placed with the parents, the family is ready to return home and settle into a routine. Thus begins the process of the family becoming a cohesive whole and developing a family identity. Amidst the diaper changes and the lack of sleep, the family gradually claims a multicultural – and in some cases multiracial – identity.

Families often are met in the public sphere by questions from strangers, and sometimes these

questions are inappropriate (“Is she really your daughter?”), intrusive (“Do you know anything about his ‘real’ parents?”), or simply misguided (“Couldn’t you have children of your own?”). To deal with these insensitive questions, it is important that the family have strong, solid networks of support, and that parents model healthy ways of responding (“She is my ‘real child,’ and I’m as proud of her as I could be!”).

International adoption and ‘openness’

Throughout centuries, families have been cultivated through avenues other than birth: for example, kinship ties, communal environments, or creating opportunity for an underresourced child. However, as adoption became formally legalized in the United States in the early 1850s, it was conducted under a veil of secrecy – adoptive families were not given information about the child’s birthparents, and vice versa. This secrecy, called “closed” adoption, was believed to benefit the child and enable him or her to make a full psychological and physical commitment to their adoptive family. In other words, it was intended to decrease confusion for the adoptee.

However, subsequent research has strongly demonstrated that adoptees’ awareness (or “openness”) in discovering their identities, communicating about their biological families, and exploring their homeland, has a direct association with healthy identity adjustment (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998). In fact, the climate surrounding adoption has changed so much that most of today’s “domestic” adoptions (those conducted within the United States), contain some degree of openness. Even with regards to international adoption, what Grotevant and McRoy (1998) called the “continuum of openness” still applies. Although some international adoptions are initially presented as “confidential” or “closed” because little information is exchanged between birth

parents and adoptive parents – mainly due to the homeland’s strong cultural stigmas against sharing information or because of the logistical challenges of geography – the adoption can still be conceptualized as fluid along the continuum. Later in life, the adoptee may choose to reach out to their homeland to search for their birthfamily, or may incorporate or accentuate their ethnic identity as they mature.

Research findings regarding healthy family development

Research suggests that creating a supportive and open environment in which the adoptee can explore how his or her ethnic and environmental contexts intersect, is associated with healthy identity formation. In other words, the family should foster an atmosphere of pride for the multifaceted identity of the adoptee. A study by Yoon (2004) concluded that Korean adoptees who reported more self-identification with their Korean heritage had higher levels of self-esteem. Feigleman and Silverman (1984) found that pride in ethnic heritage correlated with higher levels of socio-emotional adjustment in international adoptees. Finally, studies show that arming adoptees with information about their heritage can help combat future racism, discrimination, and misinformation, and can help the adoptee foster a sense of pride in their identity (Scroggs, & Heitfield, 2001; Vonk, 2001).

Furthermore, research suggests that the plasticity, openness, and general cultural competence of the family in support of the adoptee are other critical ingredients in fostering healthy adjustment. Huh and Reid (2000) acquired detailed information about Korean adoptees between the ages of 9 and 11, including the level of involvement in birthcountry activities, traditions, and open communication within the family. Huh and Reid (2000) distinguished between two broad groups of adoptees: one that was “accepting of difference”

and the other that experienced “ethnic dissonance” (p. 82). The former group had pride in their ethnic heritage and explained their difference as “special,” while the latter group did not, and identified less with their Korean identity. Huh and Reid (2000) concluded that the children in the latter group may have been stifled in their exploration of their ethnic heritage because their parents and families did not promote this kind of exploration through activities, groups, or dialogue.

Conclusion

Families’ pathways towards international adoption are lined with educational and emotional

milestones, and the journey must be undertaken with a great deal of patience and openness. Although all families face challenges, families formed through international adoption face additional, complex challenges. Maintaining a lens of openness, not only outwardly to the world as the family expands its social networks and zones of comfort, but also within the family (for example, if the adoptee chooses to search for birthparents) is critical to the family’s healthy development. Supporting the exploration of identity formation, including how adoptees make meaning of themselves in the world, is a process that the family should undertake together.

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