

Fact Sheet:

Adopting an Older Child

Are you considering adopting a child age 5 or older?

A child who is 5 years old or older when you meet him or her is considered an “older child.”

The life stories of older children qualified for international adoption can vary depending on the country of origin.

- A child from China can be up to 13 years old, may have medical needs and has probably lived in an orphanage or foster care setting for some years.
- A child could have been orphaned or relinquished somewhat recently, or could have been in an orphanage since early childhood.
- A child from Eastern Europe can be up to 16 years old and could have been removed from the biological family very young, or rather recently.

Advice & Insight from Families Who Have Adopted Older Children

Q: What kinds of families do well with these kids?

A: Experienced, committed and prepared families! We have had parents of older children, parents of step-children or blended families, and parents of multiple adopted children do very well.

“I told my child, ‘If he burns down the garage, he is still ours! If he hurts the dog, he is still ours!’”

Q: Is language a barrier?

A: Generally, no. There are good translation programs for phones and computers for the initial stage. Most larger cities have counselors who can work in languages other than English, and the children learn English remarkably quickly, especially with the support of ESL (English as a Second Language) classes at school. According to families’ feedback, it usually takes about six months for an older child to pick up a new language, and about a year for him or her to speak English rather fluently.

“We were able to find people who could translate for us, or at least have conversations with our child over the phone.”

Q: What about school?

A: We recommend that older children begin going to school fairly soon after coming home, because they benefit from the structure and peer interaction.

In terms of their previous schooling, the children can vary a lot. We have seen the whole range, from well-educated children to those who have had limited or no formal classes.

“We adopted a child who was 11 years old and had never been in a classroom. We had to work very closely with our child’s school. We started her out with short days and needed an ILP (Individual Learning Plan), ESL (English as a Second Language), the school social worker and extra tutoring. “

Even those families who homeschool will need to have good support and tutors. A boy adopted from China at the age of 13 described his academic situation this way: “I was like a frog sitting at the bottom of a well.”

It should be noted that children who are not legally adopted before they enter the United States (such as those who are adopted from Latvia or the Philippines) will not be allowed to attend public school until the adoption is finalized.

Q: I am considering hosting an older child before deciding about adoption. Will this give me enough information to be confident to adopt?

A: “Hosting is like dating, and adoption is like marriage.”

“The information I got about my child during the hosting period was good. I would say that what we saw during the hosting period was the tip of the iceberg.”

It is important to remember that people will try to be on their best behavior during a short stay. It is natural for a child who has a significant history of harm (including possible sexual abuse) to wait for months or years before trusting enough to bring that into the open. A family who adopts a child they have hosted needs to be committed to the child no matter what!

Q: What about birth order?

A: The rule of thumb is to preserve the birth order of your current children and not bring an older child into the family. In fact, we highly discourage families from bringing an older child into a home that has children younger than the adoptee. If there is anyone in the family who is vulnerable, adopt only younger and smaller than that person. The exceptions to that rule who

have done well have been very aware of all the potential risks, including physical and sexual abuse.

“We knew our new daughter would have to go with an older sister until we knew her better. We could not have her share a room with a younger child.”

Q: Will an older child be able to attach?

A: Yes, given time. But it looks very different than the adoption of a younger child.

“My boy is all over the map – clingy and baby-like one moment, and independent and adult-like the next.”

Many of these children have loved and been loved, and some of them may have been abused physically and emotionally. They need time to grieve their losses and pain and adjust to their new circumstances. A few have not known love, and it will be a long road for them and their families.

Q: How hard is it, really?

A: Pretty hard.

“Our motivation was to provide a future to a child. We had very low expectations that we would get much back for quite a while, and we knew her needs would have to come first.”

“Anyone over 13 is not coming into the family as a child. That is a young adult who will decide to become part of the family on his terms. Sort of like a son-in-law – loving, respectful, but no history of being your baby.”

“I know that when people see our family out and about, it looks easy. But we work very hard and use a lot of outside support.”

Q: What kind of resources will be needed?

A: Any family waiting for an older child should begin interviewing counselors and should look for a counselor who speaks the child’s original language. Interviewing several families who have adopted older kids internationally can be helpful and realistic preparation. Those who

have “been there and done that” can also provide ongoing support/consultation after your older child gets home and when situations appear.

A family who lives far from city resources like hospitals, therapists and well-equipped schools will find that it is hard to manage the driving and time that will be required. Good insurance is a must.

Have we scared you away yet??

We very much want to help older children become the people they have the potential to be.

Click [here](#) if you would like to begin a conversation (If you are using Google Chrome as your web browser you will need to right click on “here.”).