



Approaching Your Child's History

A TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS

Presented by



THE PARK
ADOPTION COMMUNITY CENTER



A Letter from Josh and Lily

We rushed to China right away when we learned about the new Adoption Law that made international adoption of Chinese children possible in 1992.

What we saw shocked us beyond belief. Countless abandoned baby girls were cramped next to each other in dark, cold, and tiny brick dorms filled with the pungent smell of feces, sweat, and rotten food. There were no nannies, no toys, no water, and no medicine in sight. The shrill screams of hundreds of babies all at once made the dorms shake.

And then we noticed some babies were eerily quiet, having given up their cries for help or simply too weak to make another audible sound, or...

“How many will make it?” we carefully asked Mr. Zhou, director of a large orphanage in central China. He hesitated for a few seconds and quickly looked around to make sure no officials were close by before whispering, “At least 1/3 will die before they reach the age of six months, and many more afterwards.”

We were utterly heart-broken and horrified! These innocent baby girls were paying the ultimate price for the cruelty of their nation’s one child policy. Countless budding lives were smashed before they had the slightest chance to blossom, leaving behind the weeping, mourning, traumatized and guilt-filled birth mothers and fathers in a dark hole for the rest of their lives....

“Stand up! Rescue these babies!” We heard His voice loud and clear.

Chinese Children Adoption International (CCAI) was born in September 1992 out of an instinctual drive to save these children. Twenty-seven years later, more than 13,000 children’s lives have been saved through CCAI as a result of the amazing love and infectious passion of beautiful adoptive parents.

According to the Chinese government, its One Child Policy had “successfully” prevented more than 400 million births between 1980 and 2010. We cannot help but wonder if these “prevented births” include all the millions of children forcefully aborted or the hundreds of thousands of children unwillingly abandoned or the children who died on the streets and in the orphanages.

Yes, China adoption is a life-rescuing and life-saving endeavor. It was at the beginning and it still is now. It is a beautiful act of life-giving love – yearning for love and offering love. But due to the complexity of the political, economic, and cultural backdrop of the One Child Policy, adoptees and adoptive families are left facing many troubling questions and struggles. Adoptees may ask: Why was I abandoned? What is my true story? What would have happened if I were not adopted? Adoptive parents may ask: What if my child was not truly abandoned? How do I support my child when I myself don’t know the answers?

Whatever the questions, we hope you will find this toolkit helpful. We will never have all of the answers. Only time and increasingly more openness of China will reveal the truth and secrets of this life puzzle. But as adoptive parents ourselves, we know one thing for certain: Every child deserves a loving family, and families are where children truly belong.

*Sincerely,
Josh & Lily
Co-Founders of CCAI*

Introduction

Information offered in recent years about China adoption and the effects of the One Child Policy can be troubling to navigate. This toolkit serves as a resource for parents of adopted Chinese children who are struggling to process the potential harsh realities that exist in their child's history. It is the hope that, with this toolkit, parents will find confidence and affirmation when approaching hard conversations with and about their children. Additionally, we hope it will provide solace to parents as they come to terms with their own emotions and decisions in the face of confusing circumstances. It is important to remember that these tools can also be used when encountering any life stressors or challenges, not just challenges related to adoption.

When presented with unexpected and difficult information, it is often easier on our psyche to take that information at face value. Doing so protects ourselves from feeling out of control when what we learn conflicts with what we knew. In order to regain control, we often seek information that reinforces what we encounter. It is important to remember that although often presented as "THE" truth, these pieces of information are part of an ambiguous truth, and only singular pieces of a larger, more difficult story. When considering what is offered in published articles, films, or blog posts, ask hard questions - specifically, whose stories are not being told, what realities are being ignored, and what reason do such publishers have for providing the information they have offered?

The history connected to the One Child Policy and how it impacted China is rife with heartache. Although China's stringent family-limitation practices can be difficult to absorb, it does not eliminate some underlying themes of humanity that also existed. Namely that, these policies were attempts to help a country survive, individuals worked hard to find and save innocent children who were survivors of these policies, and the Chinese government recognized that these children needed something beyond orphanage care to survive.

What does this mean for you?

Beyond all the difficult truths is one fact that cannot be refuted - your child reached your arms because of this difficult policy, a child who was not able to stay with the family that birthed them. You are your child's family and that is something to hold onto.

There is an opportunity now to not destroy the adoption story you wrote when you and your child became a family. There is also an opportunity to take in new information and learn as much as possible about the history surrounding your child's adoption, ensuring that you remain open to all possible narratives. Navigating the truths presented and adjusting to changing narratives can be confusing, negative, and overwhelming, but it can also be eye opening in a positive way. The only obligation you have is to process what you are feeling as a result of new realities and to write a story that is healthy for you, your child, and your family.

This toolkit seeks to provide a place to process a new story, a story that began when you made the decision to adopt and a story that continues to change every day. It serves as a guide to work through your feelings surrounding your changing story with a goal to empower you to create the truth your family needs to thrive.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is broken up into five sections. We encourage you to work through them in order, as each section builds on the previous section, providing additional support and development.

What Do We Know (or Not Know)? - presents information about the One Child Policy and China adoption.

What Does it Mean? - provides general discussion about possible questions or stressors that may arise as your understanding of your child's history evolves.

How Does it Feel? - offers exploration of the many emotions you may experience as a parent working through a changing story.

What Can You Do? - gives step-by-step guidance and tools to process and manage new facts and emotions related to your role as a parent.

Supporting Your Child - details considerations for navigating difficult conversations with your child surrounding these topics.

Processing Prompts - these sections are focused, journal-style guides to help you work through thoughts and feelings and identify how to proceed.

What Do We Know (or Not Know)

China adoption and China's One Child Policy go hand in hand

The One Child Policy was the last of four family planning policies that were implemented to manage population growth in China in the 1970s. These family planning policies were the result of multiple revisions to policies that were introduced throughout the mid- to late-1900s (1950-1980) with a goal to reduce overall population growth, stabilize the economy, and maintain available resources in China. These population control mechanisms had a deep impact on China and its people. The three family planning policy revisions introduced in 1971 increased the legal marriage and childbearing age, regulated birth spacing, and decreased the number of children allowed per family.

The regulations of these policies varied between urban versus rural areas and even more so for minority populations, but as these early measures failed to slow China's dangerous population growth, the final major policy revision -- One Child Policy -- was introduced in 1979. The One Child Policy strictly limited the number of children a family could have to: one child per urban family and two children per rural family (if the first child was a girl). Regulations remained variable for minority populations. This drastic revision forced families to make extremely difficult decisions. By 1982, it was considered a constitutional duty of marriage to practice family planning. Overall, an unanticipated outcome of these policies was overcrowded orphanages. As a result, the Chinese government made the decision to open the country to international adoption in 1992.

China's One Child Policy held unexpected consequences

Prior to implementation of the 1970's policies, the communication from Chairman Mao in the 1960s was to focus on population increase, stating that a larger population made for a stronger country. China's rapid growth in the 60s caused an economic collapse, depletion of resources, and nationwide famine. When the 1970's family planning policies were instituted, families were not offered strategies for managing such an abrupt shift despite significant pressures from the government to comply. As a result, parents were widely fearful about the options available after becoming pregnant and were forced to face grim options such as aborting pregnancies, abandoning children, or giving their children away in order to follow an uncompromising law.

China's child abandonment in context

Very little concrete information is available around child abandonment in China, as no solid statistics or data exists. It is known that due to the hard-line One Child Policy, there was a great fear of being caught and punished for birthing an "over-quota" child or abandoning a child, both of which were illegal. This resulted in hundreds of thousands of infants being quietly left in public places in the hopes they would be found and cared for. Other families gave their child to individuals who offered the promise to keep their child safe. These individuals ranged from extended family members with no children, families living in rural areas where policy rules were less strict, or "matchmakers" who had experience finding homes for over-quota children.

We now know that, with the great number of children being abandoned, some citizens made it their personal duty to become "finders" who focused their efforts solely on finding and bringing abandoned children to orphanages. Additionally, some other individuals who were unaware of orphanages in their area found and raised these children themselves. Unfortunately, dedicated finders were scarce, and a significant number of abandoned children did not reach orphanage doors or survive.

It is important to also acknowledge the instances of child trafficking that have been promoted in the media, offering the perception that the movement of children was motivated by growing international adoption interest and occurring with high frequency and in a criminal way. The contemporary definition of child trafficking does not fit the action taken related to child abandonment in China but is applied to such situations, thereby evoking difficult emotions. While there is limited data on China's unethical child movement versus child abandonment or "match-making", it is factually evident that cases of child trafficking for the purpose of adoption were uncommon events.

What Does it Mean?

When you began exploring the possibility of adding to your family through adoption from China, you likely encountered a widespread narrative about China and the reasons their children were available for adoption. Over time, this initial understanding about your child's history may have been challenged and may continue to be challenged as new information is presented in the media or in other forums. We encourage you to remain open-minded as you navigate a shifting reality.

Your decision to adopt was a life-supporting choice

In China, the ramifications of the One Child Policy were swift. Orphanages were overcrowded and children were waiting for adoption. They needed families. Although some may have been removed from their homes in unethical ways, this was a function of how the government was enforcing a difficult policy. Many Chinese families felt hopeless with no other options. Your decision to adopt gave a home to a child with no home, a family to a child with no family.

When you adopted, you were acting in good faith

We are all doing the best we can with the tools we have available to us at any given time. The same holds true with information. We can only act with the information we have been provided. When you made the decision to adopt, you were acting in good faith on the information you were given about circumstances in China. While you may never know your child's true abandonment story, your good faith action supported a child who needed a family.

What you believed may or may not be true

The One Child Policy is one aspect of a multi-faceted, difficult time in China's history -- a history you have been drawn into through adoption. Adoption exists to find families for children without families. This has not changed. Remember why you made the decision to adopt. While it may feel that the story you once believed has been challenged, it is possible that it is still the truth. You know more now about your child's possible history than you did yesterday and that is an empowering truth.

You do not need to act

In an effort to find some clarity, you may feel drawn to seek information on your child's abandonment story. Remember that pursuing this is a personal choice and not a mandate. Knowing more can be deeply damaging or deeply empowering. In fact, it might not be possible to know more, which can be all the more impactful. The truth is that your child is your family and you are theirs. It is also true that your child had a family before you. How that family fits into your lives is something your child will decide. The only actions you must take now are to work through what this brings up for you as a parent and support your child.

How Does it Feel?

Processing shifting realities can take time and can look different for each individual. There is no required “correct” response to difficult information because we all have different life experiences and different temperaments. However you feel, it is normal and okay. Some common responses may be feelings of shock, sadness, anger, or grief.

Shock

Over time, you may have learned information about China adoption that was unsettling to you. When we get overwhelmed with information or experiences, the brain may actually shut down as a way to protect ourselves. This occurs in many traumatizing situations of varying degrees in everyone. It may take days or weeks (or longer) for shock to dissipate which is the length of time it takes for our brains to feel safe enough to work through what it has learned.

Sadness

You may feel a deep sense of sadness for a variety of reasons, maybe even sadness you cannot explain. Sadness is a natural response to difficult situations and may look different for every person. Generally, sadness will fade and ultimately resolve and experiencing sadness can help us appreciate more fully our feelings of joy.

Anger

You may feel anger, a sense of being frustrated or infuriated over learning information that was not made available before. Anger is often more socially acceptable than other emotions and, as a result, we are ‘trained’ in our society to project anger when we feel other troubling emotions. Anger is often an umbrella emotion for other feelings that are less easy to identify and it may be possible to identify other emotions living under the surface of your anger.

Grief

Grief, though related to sadness, is a separate aspect that is connected to a sense of loss. This could be occurring because you now feel disconnected from your adoption story. Grief is often the result of a change that was out of your control. That lack of control can be difficult to work through because it likely came at a time when you were not prepared for such a shift and this is unsettling. Working through grief is multi-layered and can feel confusing at times. However, as with sadness, grief tends to wane with time.

What Can You Do?

Acknowledge the experience

Managing emotions requires acknowledging the experience. Individuals may find themselves trying to avoid some emotions or thoughts because it feels easier or safer. Unfortunately, this avoidance only perpetuates, and often strengthens, the difficult feelings. So, how do we make our way through this?

- ❖ First, let yourself work through all the pieces of information you have learned. Think through your experience generally, as if you are viewing a movie or watching a train go by. Try not to focus for any length of time on any one specific aspect of the experience that is difficult for you. The goal is to focus on the facts as opposed to the emotions elicited from the information.
- ❖ After you have given yourself time to do this, give yourself space to feel what you are feeling. Cry, stay in bed, journal your feelings, admit to yourself you are feeling how you are feeling, eat some ice cream...do whatever you need to do to acknowledge the emotions.
- ❖ Then, work on introducing some adaptive coping skills to manage these emotions. You may find there are barriers to your use of coping skills so these may need to be addressed as well.
- ❖ Over time, you should find that you will feel these emotions less intensely and this is the best time to go back to the facts and readdress them. When you are able to view them without the reactivity, you should find that you are able to think through it more effectively.

Identify accurate emotions

Oftentimes, our initial feelings may be influenced by a sense of what we *should* feel. You are not required to feel any specific way and your feelings can differ from someone else's. Sometimes, what we really feel has not been identified. For example, when you feel anger, you may find that underneath lies sorrow or grief or confusion. When we are able to find the true emotions we are feeling, it is easier to work through them.

- ❖ While it may be hard to actively think of words to apply to what you are feeling in your mind or body, sometimes having prompts to do so can assist with this. Using an emotions chart (see page 12) can be a great way to expand what you are feeling, as you read through all the emotions listed, you should be able to identify if each applies to you at that specific time.
- ❖ Another way to work on determining our emotions is to link what you are feeling to other, similar, experiences. If you can remember feeling this way in the past, you might find yourself better able to connect with the emotions you are feeling now. An emotions chart is included in this toolkit.

Practice adaptive coping skills

It is easy to forget our adaptive (healthy) coping skills when feeling an overwhelming sense of emotion. In fact, we often turn to maladaptive (unhealthy) coping skills such as overeating, use of alcohol or drugs, lashing out at people we feel close to, throwing ourselves into work, etc. because they are easier to access. Adaptive coping skills are the best for managing difficult emotions and are going to work better once you have given yourself space to feel any difficult feelings.

- ❖ Adaptive coping skills are ones that benefit us in positive ways. They are rejuvenating ways to be kind to ourselves. Examples of adaptive coping skills are taking a walk, taking a shower, working out, sitting in the sun, reading, journaling, getting a pedicure, cooking, going on a trip, spending time with someone we love, watching a movie or tv show, etc.
- ❖ Remember that coping skills do not have to be lengthy or daunting. A 5-minute walk or porch sit can be just as effective as going on a weekend trip.
- ❖ Sometimes we may find that despite our best efforts, we cannot find space for coping skills or maybe they do not feel like they are working. When this happens, it often means these are not the right coping skills for you at this time. Even coping skills that worked previously might not work for you now. If you identify any of this to be true, try something different!

Seek support

You are not alone! There are many families who are working through similar emotions with difficult or challenging situations that may be related or unrelated to adoption. Talk it out. Express your feelings. Process your feelings. Discuss the facts. Speaking with your own immediate support system may help. If necessary, seek professional counseling with someone who is experienced with adoption. Sometimes, just like our children, we need someone to listen as we work things out.

Think it through

In the two “processing” sections of this toolkit, you will see several prompts to assist you in working through the information you are now trying to integrate. You may use these prompts to work on processing your thoughts and emotions and how you would like to move forward. Or, these prompts may be helpful to begin a discussion with your support network as a way to assist you in getting to a more comfortable place in light of this new reality.

Processing Prompts

Take a moment and sit with your emotions. Try to focus on what you are feeling, not what you are thinking. Notice where you may be feeling these things in your body. Acknowledge them and feel them. Make a list of all the emotions you are experiencing, whether “positive” or “negative.”

How comfortable are you with the emotions you are experiencing? Are these emotions you have felt before? If so, does feeling these emotions link to any other life experiences for you? If not, what is it like to be experiencing these new emotions?

Take some time and write down the messages you have provided to your child about the reason for their adoption. What dialogue was offered to them with regard to how or why they were made available for adoption? After working through this Toolkit, do you feel that these messages remain valid? If so, why? If not, what aspects of these messages have become invalidated?

Make a list of the coping skills you generally use when you are having a difficult time. Then, identify which of these are adaptive and which are maladaptive. Consider the adaptive skills you’ve used before and which may be appropriate to utilize at this time. What coping skills are you willing to try introducing that you have never tried before?

Make a list of individuals in your support network. Look through the list and identify who are the BEST people to assist you as you work through these emotions, paying attention to those who can offer unconditional, non-judgmental, and encouraging support and those who are able to just listen without challenging or invalidating. Also, can you identify any individuals who may be able to talk through this with you in a way that can support alternate perspectives while still remaining supportive and neutral? If so, identify if this is something that may benefit you.

Supporting Your Child

You may find that another challenging aspect of approaching these changing realities is navigating its impact on your child and your instincts may immediately be to engage in a discussion with them. Before you do so, it is important to ask, “What does my child need from me now?”. When working through your response, we encourage you to separate what YOU need from what THEY need because it is likely their needs may not be the same. You raised your child and you know them best - their emotions, reaction styles, ways of coping, and what works best for support. However, these are likely not going to be easy conversations, for anyone, and finding a healthy balance between facts and emotions is key.

- ❖ If you feel, after acknowledging and processing your own emotional reactions, that your child wants to engage in a conversation, it is important to be open and honest. Additionally, if you don’t know something, it is okay to acknowledge that and support the emotions related to not knowing.
- ❖ You may also find that you or your child are not ready to explore these topics and emotions further. There is no timeline for discussion and it should only occur when both parties are in a place where they can receive the information and discuss it in a healthy way. When both sides feel safe enough to have the conversation, it will be a more beneficial conversation.
- ❖ Your response or reaction to challenging realities may vary wildly from that of your child. Remember also that their response may change over time, and you can only do your best – just as you’ve done since the first day you became a parent! Whatever their response, it is valid. Acknowledge the feelings in your child and let them know that you are open to listening, without judgment, at any time. This is not a problem to solve but rather an opportunity for you to be present with your child. Validating emotions is the key to healing.
- ❖ The response of adoptees to their changing adoption story is a sensitive topic and varies in many ways from how this looks for adoptive parents. It may be helpful for your child to utilize the Adoptee Toolkit which is designed to address the specific emotional needs of adoptees before engaging them in a discussion about these topics. Additionally, finding connections with other adoptees may be beneficial for them as having a support network encountering similar challenges is recommended.

Processing Prompts

Take a moment and sit with your emotions specifically related to speaking with your child. Try to focus on what you are feeling, not what you are thinking. Notice where you may be feeling these things in your body. Acknowledge them and feel them. Make a list of all the emotions you are experiencing, whether “positive” or “negative.”

Ask yourself whether you feel safe enough to engage in a dialogue with your child right now. If not, what else should you do before you can do this? How will you know when you are ready?

Think through how you can talk about this with your child. What does that need to look like? What does your child need from you so his or her feelings can be validated?

Consider how you can best manage your own emotions during the discussion while also modeling that emotional responses are okay. What tools do you need to equip yourself with or what work do you still need to do in order to be successful in this area?

Identify whether the information you’ve learned invalidates the conversations you have had with your child about adoption prior to this time. If so, which aspects need to be addressed? What do I need to communicate now to manage this shift?

Imagine a “worst case scenario” reaction from your child. What would that be? Do you feel that you have the ability to manage this reaction or response effectively and productively? If not, what tools do you feel you still need that you did not gain from your work in this toolkit?

Where to Go From Here

In the face of the uncertainties you may encounter surrounding your child's history, this toolkit serves to provide a way to untangle the thoughts and feelings you may have. It is possible that, in working through this material, you feel prepared to move forward or you feel that you still need a different type of support.

In addition to this toolkit, there are many other types of support available such as individual, group, or family therapy where you may be able to further process emotions and identify a forward path. Support groups can be useful for connecting with other families working through similar questions and participation in such groups may offer comfort and a feeling of connection. Books and articles may be useful as well, ones that delve deeper into what is offered here or ones that provide specific information on the history or stories surrounding the One Child Policy and China adoption. Finally, there are online forums and blogs but these should be navigated with caution as the information can sometimes be fueled by the emotions and struggle of individuals who have not yet done the work you were able to do here in this toolkit.

However you continue to move forward, we hope that you can continue to use the skills offered here as you work through this and other life challenges.

Adaptive

COPING SKILLS

Write in a journal

Take a walk

Paint your nails

Take a trip

Create art

Watch tv

Go to a movie

Do a word search

Listen to music

Play with a pet

Go shopping

Take a nap

Clean something

Read a book

Knit or sew

Meditate

Plant something

Hug someone

Smile at 5 people

Stretch

Write a letter

Make a playlist

Read the Bible

Ride a bike

Feed some ducks

Pray

Cook a meal

Go for a long drive

Make a milkshake

Get a massage

Look at pictures

Play a game

Color with crayons

List your blessings