

# **Is International Adoption For You?**

**A Special Report by Dr. Ellen Fitzenrider**

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Greetings!

If you are beginning to contemplate international adoption as a viable option to growing your family, welcome. You are now officially a PAP: adoption community lingo for ‘prospective adoptive parent.’ Other terms that you will become familiar with are:

**Adoptee:** a child or grown person who became part of a family through adoption.

**Birthparent/birthmother/birthfather:** the biological parent(s) of a child who was/is placed for adoption.

**Was adopted/is adopted:** A child who enters a family through adoption *was* adopted. Adoption is a verb not an identity. It is how a child becomes a part of a family. After that, the child is *your* child, *your* son, *your* daughter, sister, brother or cousin.

**Adoption triad:** The three major parties in an adoption: birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted child.

There are lots of places to find out about the paperwork process, waiting times, travel considerations and country requirements of international adoption. Books on International Adoption, adoption agency websites and materials, and, in the resource section of this site, [www.internationaladoptionnews.com](http://www.internationaladoptionnews.com)

I want to cover the topic from a slightly different angle. I plan on addressing some emotional, social and cultural issues that are often overlooked by PAP’s anxious and in a hurry to get the process started. I will start by including the afterword from my book, *Finding Katherine...a spiritual journey to Vietnam and Motherhood*, where I address some of these issues:

### **Finding Katherine Afterword**

Adopting Katherine not only opened up the world of motherhood to me, but many other worlds as well. The moment “American” became a part of Katherine’s identity, my identity changed with it. I became a mommy. I became a part of an Asian-American family. I became not just a parent, but an *adoptive* parent. And, because my child is not Caucasian, we are a billboard every moment that we are out in public. Which makes me a sometimes willing, sometimes not so, adoption advocate.

People can’t help but to make assumptions when they see us, as people tend to do when anyone is different. All of these statements or questions have either been spoken to me or I have heard them whispered nearby. Sometimes I have the energy for an answer, sometimes I don’t...sometimes I’m too polite to say what I really want to:

- That's one of those Chinese babies.  
*No she's not, she's from Vietnam.*
- She must have been infertile...  
*No, I'm not, and it's none of your business.*
- I hear the conditions in those orphanages are terrible...  
*Sometimes yes, sometimes no...it's a shame that due to unfortunate circumstances there are children in the world who don't have a loving family who can afford to feed them. What are YOU doing to help?*
- Is she 'bonding' well?  
*(Drop-jawed shock that someone asked that to our faces after watching Katherine and I in joyous exchange, and it's certainly a personal matter that I don't need to share with a stranger.)*
- Was she abandoned?  
*Ditto.*
- Why didn't you adopt a waiting American child?  
*Many are special needs or older or with emotional issues from bouncing around in the foster care system. I'm a single mom and know what I'm capable of handling right now. How many of them have you adopted?*
- Don't 'those people' know about birth control?  
*In third-world countries, there isn't always the information and resources to ensure dependable birth control. And abortion is often not an option when a pregnant mother knows that she will be unable to care for a child.*
- How could a mother ever give up her child?  
*It is the hardest thing in the world.*
- Where is her 'real' mother?  
*I'm her 'real' mother.*
- What a lucky little girl, she'll have a much better life here...  
*I'm the lucky one.*

And so I am. Enlightened people just tell me "What a beautiful little girl!" (She is). Occasionally I meet an older Caucasian man, woman or couple, and their faces light up to see her...I know what they're going to tell me: "We have an Asian granddaughter, and she's the light of our lives!" They know. They *know*. We have been blessed with gifts from afar.

Along with my regular duties as a parent, my job as Katherine's mommy will grow to include being a support for her sense of self as she realizes that she's different. She's adopted. She's a member of a minority. People will make certain assumptions about her based on how she looks. Bigots will say certain things to her for the same reason. She will sometimes be treated differently—perhaps badly—because of the color of her skin. May I have the patience, the sensitivity, the awareness and the compassion to help her, help us, through these difficult issues. In the U.S., over 20,000 children were adopted internationally in 2002. Our children come from Russia, China, Korea, Guatemala, Vietnam and Cambodia, just to name a few of countries. Our multi-

cultural families are changing the face of American families! I wish the day soon comes when ALL of the people living in the world around us can all see and embrace the richness there is to be found in diversity.

A woman far away across the world once made a decision, a selfless decision that caused her great pain. It sorrows me that she had that decision to make. In a twist of fate, her circumstance has brought great joy into my life. I think about that often. And I trust that someday in the greater scheme of things, sorrow, joy, fairness, love and destiny will all make sense.

#### Etiquette for the non-adoptive person:

To start off with, please be mindful of what you say in front of a child. They hear and understand more than you know. Don't risk causing emotional trauma just to satisfy your curiosity.

Biological parent, or birthmother/birthfather. The mother and father who physically are responsible for the birth of this child. Not 'real,' not 'natural.' An adoptive parent is just as real and natural as any other parent.

Abandoned, orphanage. There are many reasons why a child is available for adoption. People are familiar with China's much-publicized one-child-only policy, and that little girls are relinquished for adoption in favor of little boys. There might be the social stigma of an unwed mother. Or perhaps the child was born into such poverty that the mother or parents are unable to care for them. Regardless of the situation, if you are a complete stranger to an adoptive parent that you run into, it is less than polite to press for such details of their family matters.

Cost. Yes, the cost of the adoptive process can unfortunately run into tens of thousands of dollars. We did not 'pay' for the child, we paid for the tedious process of documentation and lawyers and translators and orphanage donations and agency fees.

Bonding and adjusting. Children are such amazingly resilient beings, and I was totally amazed at my own daughter's "go with the flow" attitude from day one. Most children do stunningly well. And for those that do have difficulties, it's really a private matter. If you see a parent and child obviously enamored of each other, what else is there to say?

Support. A family that came to be through adoption is just as much a 'real' family as any other. A mother waiting to bring home a son or daughter is just as deserving of a baby shower as a pregnant mother. The arrival of a child just as deserving of a celebration. Educate yourself, educate those around you. Be respectful, be considerate.

Another document regarding international adoption is located on the site of Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute:

[Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute discussion on international adoption](#)

**Like life, birth, parenting, love, health and fortune, adoption holds no guarantees.**

No agency or facilitator can guarantee that your adoption process will conclude without difficulty, or that unforeseen circumstances don't completely halt you in your tracks. You cannot receive a guarantee that an internationally adopted child will be 100% healthy physically, mentally or emotionally. But the same applies to a biological child that shares your DNA. Expect that somewhere along the path of your life together, parenting an internationally adopted child will require some special attention on your part. Whether it is helping a child who was institutionalized for the first 18-24 months of his or her life to 'catch up' developmentally, to making an extra effort to educate yourself on another culture so that you can help your child appreciate her roots. From being put in the role of 'adoption advocate' or 'adoption educator' simply by attracting the attention of strangers (especially in the case of interracial adoption) to helping your child's teachers for years to come understand that previously unquestioned activities and topics (family tree and hereditary trait assignments, for example) need to be looked at from a more sensitive perspective. If you are Caucasian living in the Western world (and through adoption you become a part of an interracial family), you probably never have experienced discrimination and bigotry in a way that your child needs to be able to deal with. You are your child's teacher. You are now a part of a multicultural family. You need to be able to put yourself in the shoes of your child. You will need to learn how to be proactive, find support groups, and anticipate issues (as much as you can) prior to them negatively impacting your child's self-esteem and well-being. As the title of a popular adoption book states, *Love is Not Enough*. That being said, international adoption has personally been a wonderful, joyous journey for me, as it has been for hundreds of thousands of families, and I would do it all again in a minute.

As your adopted child matures, as he attempts to define his place in the world, in your family, and among his peers, there are naturally occurring stages of awareness that you need to be conscious of. Although you can't necessarily anticipate what issues will come up at any exact point and time, be assured, they WILL come up. It is helpful to pre-plan responses to obvious questions: "Mommy, did I grow in your tummy?" "Why am I brown?" (when you, the parent, are not). How will you share your child's adoption story with him, with her? Start a *lifebook* before you travel to meet your child, and put in lots of blank pages ready for snapshots, notes and mementoes. Trust me, chances are you won't find the time once you get back...you'll be too busy!

Above all: in some way, get some support from the international adoption community, from people who have been down this path before you, or who are going down it with

you right now. Whether participate actively with a country-group (Families with Children from China, Families of Children from Vietnam, etc.), attending regular meetings, culture camps and holiday activities, or you become a member of an online family. Just because your child became a US citizen when she touched down on American soil does not mean that ethnicity, culture and adoption will not be issues that you will have to deal with if you just try to act like ‘a regular family.’ Somewhere down the road, these are issues that your child will have to deal with. Let them be issues that you can deal with together.



An interesting document put out by C.A.S.E., The Center for Adoption Support and Education: <http://www.adoptionsupport.org/> shows how adoption tends to impact a child at different stages in their life, based on their mental and emotional development: (reprinted by permission):

## Children's Understanding of Adoption: Adopted Children vs. Non-Adopted Children

ADOPTEE	CHILD WHO IS NOT ADOPTED
<b>0-4</b>	
Generally does not realize differences. If notices them, likes to point them out.	Generally does not realize differences. If notices them, likes to point them out.
Feels OK about adoption and thinks story is special.	Feels OK about adoption and thinks story is special.
ADOPTEE	CHILD WHO IS NOT ADOPTED
<b>5-6</b>	
Child begins to ask many questions about babies, birth, differences.	Child begins to ask many questions about babies, birth, differences.
Likes adoption story, but does not understand concepts of adoption. Feels some differences, especially if in multicultural family.	Does not understand adoption, but wonders about it when it comes up - and often asks simple questions to learn more.
Tells most people he/she is adopted.	Accepts adoption as a way to form a family.
ADOPTEE	CHILD WHO IS NOT ADOPTED
<b>7-11</b>	
Child understands basic concepts of adoption	Does not understand adoption concepts, but begins to sense that it results when birth parents "give away" child
Begins grieving process	
May stop asking questions/denial	Reaction to adopted peers based on information from adults (if any) or media
Realizes she/he lost something in order to be Adopted	
"Not everyone is adopted like me"	"Not everyone is adopted like he is"
"Why was I adopted?"	"Why was she adopted?"
"Why didn't they keep me?"	"Could my parents give me away?"
"Did I do something wrong?"	"I'm glad I am not adopted."
Increasing interest in birth parents	"Adoption is OK because I like you" or "Adoption is NOT OK because I don't like you"
Fantasies about living with different parents	Fantasies about living with different parents

**ADOPTEE****CHILD WHO IS NOT ADOPTED****12-14**

Anger stage of grieving and dev'l stage

Anger stage of dev'l stage

May resist authority, try on new identities

May resist authority, try on new identities

Begins separating from 2 sets of parents

Begins separating from 1 set of parents

May be angry over loss of control over adoption decisions, wants more control in life

Wants more control in life

Growing sense of self: identity issues

Growing sense of self: identity issues

More complex reasoning about adoption story and needs to look at grays rather than black & white

Sees many differences about adoptive families  
Oversimplifies how adoption occurs and does not understand emotional issues

Rejects kids who are different

Rejects kids who are different

Generally does not talk about being an adoptee

May be negative about what he/she perceives adoption reflects about adoptees

What does sex have to do with adoption?

What does sex have to do with adoption?

**ADOPTEE****CHILD WHO IS NOT ADOPTED****15-17**

Separates from 2 sets of parents

Separates from 1 set of parents

Has second layer of concerns about leaving home

May face concerns about leaving home, but usually feels secure about its permanency