

# Transition from Orphanage to Home

AN ADOPTION EDUCATION  
PUBLICATION



by Rita Taddonio, CSW

A LOVE BEYOND  
BORDERS, LLC

*International Adoptions  
& Homestudy Services*

2022 Holly Street

Denver, Colorado 80207

[www.bbinternationaladoption.com](http://www.bbinternationaladoption.com)

**If** you are preparing to bring your child home, or have recently arrived home with your child, there are a number of things that are important to understand:

First and foremost, keep in mind that while you have spent months, perhaps years, preparing your minds and hearts to welcome this child into your lives and become a family, your child has had little, if any, preparation for this incredibly huge and significant change in his or her life.

Your child was going along with the daily routine when one day, there was an introduction to this person who is to be their new Mom or Dad. Certainly nothing told to them in the way of preparation makes sense to them. Cognitively, most of them are too young to understand that they are getting a new family, and most of them have no reference point for "family." If you have lived all but the first month or two of your life in an orphanage, you have no real understanding of what family means. If your child is older and has memories of a dysfunctional or unstable family life, those memories won't be an accurate reflection of the new relationship ahead with your family.

Don't be too upset or surprised if your child doesn't react to you the way you expected or hoped. Don't take it personally. It takes time to fall in love. It

takes time to become a family - to learn how to interact with each other's personalities, temperaments, etc.

In addition, orphanage life requires different skills than family life. In fact, survival skills for life in an orphanage may be "dysfunctional" in a family or American school system.

Consider these points:

- Life in institutions is often based on submissive/dominance models; therefore, your child at home may seem too aggressive or too passive.
- If a child had to be very self-sufficient for survival, or was older and became a caretaker for younger children in the institution, it will be hard for the child to let you be the parent.
- The extremely rigid routine life in institutions does not equip children with skills to initially handle transitions and flexible "free" time.
- In an institution, everything is highly scheduled/ regulated: when you sleep, when you eat, when you go to the bathroom - so a child doesn't have any opportunities to learn self-regulation or deal with choices and their consequences.
- In an institution, there are many changes over which a child has no control - staff, changes in what room he/ she lives in because of age. This can create control issues and/or a lag in developing trust.
- Living with multiple caregivers may result in indiscriminate friendliness. This is not the same as attachment disorder.
- There are times when attachment disorder is an issue - but it can be dealt with successfully with appropriate intervention.
- The children will not be used to having things of their own. It will take time to learn the concept of personal property.

There are positives and negatives to each of the above points. The important thing is that understanding where a behavior may be coming from helps you deal with it appropriately and patiently.

Your child may be coming home at eight months, 28 months, or 8 years, but you will have to teach her/him how to act and respond in a family and how to have social relationships.

Lastly, remember that this is a huge transition for your child. Everything - smells, foods, sounds, textures, language, faces - is going to be radically different from what they are used to and recognize. Respect that by going slowly in introducing them to new things (people, places, toys, foods, etc.).

## **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS**

### **While You Wait**

1. Educate yourself about the effects of institutionalization on development and if possible on the specific orphanage where your child has lived until adoption.
2. Examine what expectations you have for your child, for yourself as a parent, and for your new family - and consider how realistic they are.
3. Try to get a clear understanding of the developmental stage / capabilities typical of the specific age of your child.
4. If your child is older than two years, try to learn some simple phrases in her/his native language.
5. Try to have ongoing contact during this waiting period - send pictures, letters... involve siblings in drawing pictures, etc.

Send or bring a transition object - a small stuffed animal, a blanket. Hopefully orphanage staff will share photos or letters with your child but they may not. You can ask them to send drawings if your child is older. This may not happen either but it doesn't hurt to ask.

### **Saying Goodbye at the Orphanage**

1. Try to have time to say goodbye properly, not rushed. Bring something the child can give to caretakers.
2. Take pictures with an instant camera and give them to caretakers. Take photos of your child with caretakers, other children, the orphanage, and the town to take home.
3. Bring a transition object (in case the one you sent got lost).

4. Bring activities for the plane.

### Transition at Home

1. Presume your child's development will be delayed in at least one area, maybe more. Early childhood specialists agree that there is about a 1 month delay for every 3 months in an institution.
2. Be aware that socially and emotionally your child may be operating on the level of a child younger than her/his chronological age.
3. Avoid sensory overload - keep gatherings low-key, don't fill their room with "stuff."
4. Make sure you are the one doing all the "parenting" tasks such as bathing, feeding, putting to sleep - no matter how much grandparents or aunts/uncles want to do it.
5. Try to be fairly consistent with structure and routine.
6. If possible, allow your child to have a transitional object - a picture of friends from the orphanage, a stuffed dog or blanket you brought with you when you went to get them in their country.
7. If at all possible, take as much time as you can off from work to be with your child during this transition time, not just for the time you need to be in their country, but when you come home as well.
8. Remember that bonding doesn't "just happen." Provide experiences and interactions that will promote bonding.
9. Think about testing and finding appropriate school programs.

Again, give yourself and your child time to fall in love.

### QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

#### Sleeping Transition

**Guest:** What do you think about sleeping arrangements for when you first come home with the baby - same room?

**Rita:** Over the years my thinking on this has altered. I used to believe start out in their own room right away, now I really think it is a call you have to make considering your temperament and your child's. Going from sleeping with a room full of other kids to being by themselves is really hard. I'd see how stressed your child is being in their own room and then if it is too stressful move the bed in your room, or the child can sleep with you but then be prepared to take a long time to change that arrangement. How old is your child?

**Guest:** We still have not traveled yet... hoping for under 18 mo from Russia.

**Rita:** Sleep is a difficult issue for most of our kids... if you can try to give him/her a transitional comfort object as soon as you take her/him from the orphanage... a blanket, a cuddly bear.

**Guest:** I hear a lot of people talk about children becoming hysterical at bedtime, nap time. What causes this and what can you do to help? These seem to be kids that are fine/happy during rest of day.

**Rita:** Bedtime, sleep time is scary for most kids. It is a time when they feel out of control. Some may fear you won't be there when they wake up or that they will be moved to a different place. The best thing to do is help them transition by having regular routines around bedtime. Be there as a comforting presence. Have nap times at the same time every day if possible. Don't get them all excited like roughhousing before bedtime (Dads like to do that some time... it's great but not before sleepy time).

#### Food Transition

**Guest:** Can you talk a little about food transitions?

**Rita:** At first, because they have never had enough, make food accessible - like having lots of fruit out and around.

**Guest:** That's interesting... I hadn't heard that yet.

**Rita:** You might try to make some things that have the flavoring they are used to, but a child 18 months will pretty much adapt to any food if it appeals to their taste buds. Most children from an orphanage are used to eating at a set time so it might be helpful to find out from the staff when those times were and keep a fairly regular schedule of meal times as a family. Most children will not be used to family style meals so you will have to teach your child how your family has dinner for example - let them know what your expectations are. Also keep in mind that toddlers have no concept of time and what it takes to prepare food, so expect some impatience. In an orphanage, the food appears at a certain time and they are sat down and fed, often toddlers are spoon fed, so you may have to help your child how to feed themselves. Expect a mess, it's part of the learning process. Many orphanages can only afford mush with trace bits of meat so your child may come to you slightly malnourished, or underweight, or having difficulty or dislike of chewing. Chewing takes work and they aren't used to it. But it is important to develop muscle tone of the mouth muscles so language can develop. Make a game of chewing, make a song like "chew, chew, swallow"

and model it.

**Guest:** Do you have to worry more about choking/gag reflex because these babies aren't used to food with textures?

**Rita:** Not usually unless there is a medical issue of some sort. Most kids adapt fairly well to textures unless there is a sensory issue.

**Guest:** What about giving a toddler a bottle in Russia when they no longer use a bottle?

**Rita:** If a child is off the bottle I don't see any reason to go back. Bottles hinder the development of the muscles for talking and there are other ways to create nurturing moments, like holding & rocking and singing lullabies, songs, etc.

**Guest:** I thought it would improve their sucking abilities?

**Rita:** If your child is going to be around 18 months, you want them using a sippy cup and learning how to chew, and blowing bubbles and imitating language - that's your priority, not sucking.

**Guest:** Ok. Thanks!

**Rita:** Good question., I think it's one others often have.

## GETTING HEALTH/PREFERENCES INFORMATION

**Guest:** In preparing for transition and services, how much information is really available on the child's history to help the planning process? And are some countries better than others about providing accurate information?

**Rita:** As you know the level of information varies greatly in its amount and accuracy, however most of the info. is medical in nature. To find out your child's likes, patterns, and even history, your best bet is to get as much info from the caretaker at the orphanage as possible when you go to get your child. Not only do countries vary but orphanages within the same country vary in the amount and type and accuracy of info you will get beforehand, unless you are adopting a special needs child where you will have a clear idea of your child's issue beforehand. In all cases, upon arrival home I would suggest an assessment. It would be great to have info ahead of time but the system just doesn't seem to function that way.

**Guest:** For countries requiring 2 visits, do you recommend that parents take their own videos w/sound to let drs see here at home?

**Rita:** Yes but you have to keep in mind not to offend the doctors and caretakers at the orphanage who have expressed to me that they feel disrespected by Americans who measure children's head circumference and take pictures, etc. It's all in how you do it, how you approach them. It is best to explain you want to be able to have these for memories and to watch while you are waiting to return, etc.

## HOME - A YEAR LATER

**Guest:** We've been home 13-1/2 months with our two sons from Ukraine.

**Rita:** How old are they?

**Guest:** They were 4.4 years and 24 months at adoption, now 5.5 and 38 months.

**Guest:** A question - based on something asked earlier: did they have sleeping problems? night terrors or anything like that at first?

**Guest:** Screaming fits about bedtime, bathtime and about every other at first, but within a month, nights were ok and bath was great.

**Rita:** How are they doing? How are you doing?

**Guest:** Our 5.5 year old is still experiencing major delays, possible RAD or autism, the 3 year old is almost caught up except language.

**Rita:** The major tasks for parents are really patience and perseverance.

**Guest:** Yes, you are right Rita! :)

## Additional Resources:

- [10 Tips After Your Older Child is Home](#), by Susan M. Ward
- [The Inner World of the Adopted Child](#), by Christopher J. Alexander, Ph.D.

**Credits:** by Rita Taddonio, CSW