

**Preparing Your Family for an Orphanage Visit:
Is Your Child Ready?**
Checklist Advice from Therapists and Experienced Parents

By Jean MacLeod

An orphanage visit can be a beneficial event for an adoptee, providing a link to personal history and a grounded understanding of her life circumstances. It can also be an unpleasant, or even traumatizing experience, filled with anxiety and shock over what abandonment and institutionalization really mean.

As Jane Liedtke stressed in *Preparing for a Homeland Visit*, an orphanage visit should be planned, based on a child's individual emotional and cognitive readiness. A child who is ready for enjoying the culture of her birth country may not be ready for the intensity of visiting her Social Welfare Institute. A parent can gauge a child's ability to take in a trip of this importance, and can help prepare a child who expresses a sincere interest in the visit. An adoptee can be empowered by her understanding of reality or devastated by it, and parents can play a normative role in guiding a child through the preparation that a positive trip requires.

A checklist to help ensure a successful orphanage visit:

- Have you discussed the “tough stuff” about adoption with your child? Have you honestly answered her questions, or opened conversations about her birth mother and father, or the many possible reasons for her abandonment? Have you discussed her feelings about her losses related to her birth culture, extended birth family, primary orphanage caretaker or foster family? [Read the EMK Press parent guide *Adoption's Lifetime Issues: What Parents Need to Know* for an overview of issues that may be triggered by an orphanage visit]
- Did your child suffer deprivation or neglect in her homeland? Does she understand these issues in relation to cultural context?

- Even a young child should be comfortable working through age-appropriate discussions with you on the above topics before a visit to her institution; an orphanage is not a good place to begin discerning the truth.
- Does your child genuinely want to visit her orphanage? Will you and she be able to communicate easily about any post-visit emotional fall-out? Emotions related to an orphanage (or homeland) trip are typically behavioral in a young child, and may be “acted-out” a couple of weeks after returning home.
- Is your child comfortable talking about both her positive and her negative feelings? Are you able to listen and empathize with feelings she may have that reflect confusion, anger or sadness over the early life choices made for her?
- As Jane Liedtke suggested, working on a gift or donation for the children residing in the orphanage while planning a return trip is a valuable way to introduce cultural and economic insight. A piece of our children's identity will forever be one of those girls or boys in a foreign orphanage, but a charitable project can be utilized as a positive outgrowth of their maturity, instead of being an inadvertent vehicle for initiating a child's survivor guilt. Our older children may need us to help them talk about what they may be feeling when working toward a goal so close to home. We need to be sensitive when involving our adopted children in orphan projects, but not be afraid to teach our sons and daughters to celebrate the hands-on, life-giving changes that every single one of us has the power to make in this world.
- Will meeting her orphanage director, caretaker or foster parents raise fears of being left in China, or losing her adoptive parents? Verbally reassuring her in advance that NO one can undo her forever family is important. Designing a personal parent-child hand-squeeze for “I’m nervous” and for “I love you” help to defray anxious moments during a visit. A pre-planned event in place for after your return home helps a young child to know that you will be going home together.
- Does your child truly understand that she will not be meeting her birth parents? For some children it is a wishful fantasy, for others it is a terrorizing thought.

- Read *Kids Like Me in China*, *At Home in This World*, *We See the Moon* and *When You Were Born in China* aloud together, and use the photographs and illustrations in these books for jumping-off points for discussion. Ask open-ended questions that allow your child to interpret what she's hearing and seeing, and to express her own thoughts.
- Prepare your child for encounters with special needs children. Talk about disabilities that keep a child in an orphanage, or medical conditions that might require an infant to have an IV, be on oxygen or recovering from surgery. Some babies might be in incubators.
- Orphanage smells or sounds can be powerful triggers to pre-verbal memories. Chinese music may be a positive trigger, while hearing crying babies could cause some children to shut down. De-sensitize by talking about what you may see, hear and smell at the orphanage in advance of your trip.
- Discuss the obvious fact with your daughter that in China she will be surrounded daily by other Chinese people; for a change she will be in the majority! Your child may enjoy this, or find this unnerving and fear getting lost in the crowd.
- After you, your adoption agency or your adoption travel agency has made an appointment for you with the Director of your child's orphanage, be sure to follow up by mailing the Director a letter of introduction (in Chinese) and current photos of your family. If you wish to view your child's orphanage file, or perhaps meet with her foster mother, respectfully request it in advance, in writing. Use a reputable translator.

Help your child look forward to seeking her roots and seeing her birth country by beginning a gentle process of preparation months in advance. A knowledgeable, secure child who is comfortable with the realities of her early life will be able to respond positively to a homeland tour, an orphanage visit, and to the people responsible for her pre-adoptive care.