

Lifebook Facts & New Trends for International Adoptive Families

*Nothing but the facts
or is it
Nothing are the facts?*

Elana, born in Russia, was told “We really don’t know why your birth family couldn’t care for you.””

Katie, adopted from China, cherishes an item from a birth parent: a red note that was enclosed with her blanket.

Peter grew up celebrating his birthday on July 7th He believed that the reason for his adoption was due to poverty in Guatemala. .

There is nothing new about finding “new” adoption information—the kind that turns your life upside down and changes basic life facts. Professionally and personally, as adoptee, adoptive mother, social worker I’ve learned a single truth: everything changes in adoption.

Sometimes the changes are in a child’s levels of understanding which evolves with age. For example, the day a child realizes that prior to being adopted he or she lived somewhere else (or many places) and with birth family and caretakers. But sometimes new information emerges. The new information may be personal and specific for your child. Other times the information affects all the children adopted from an entire country.

Adopting internationally used to mean that children and their adoptive parents would rarely have any birth parent information at the time of adoption and no chance for any information or contact in the future. Birth parents were blank spaces on a form and lived thousands of miles away. Not the case today when instead families are involved with one or more of the following:

- Internet list-serves where personal information is shared about particular cities, orphanages and social conditions
- DNA testing to determine if children have biological relatives within the adoption community living in other cities, states or countries
- Private detectives who can be hired by adult adoptees or adoptive families and gather information about birth families, foster families and/or orphanages where children lived.
- Independent translations of adoption-related documents that reveal information not disclosed or known by adoption agencies or facilitators
- Search and reunions (e.g., adult Korean adoptees—now opening up to many other Countries—see resource list)
- Homeland tours

Any one of these trends has the ability to unearth or change information which can completely alter a child's life story. Suddenly the parents' previously stated "We don't know why" or "We don't have any information" is no longer true.

Thanks largely to the Internet, adoptive families can choose to seek out specific facts and information which may answer questions for their child. (The debate is fast and furious as to whether or not this is a good idea or whether or not information should be sought out only at the request and lead of an adoptee or whether it is the parent(s) role to seek out information.

Corinne Rayburn, LCSW, LMFT, a therapist who has worked with hundreds of adoptive families, always tells parents, "Our search is for [the] truth, *as best as we can ascertain.*"

So what happens when you discover the reason for your child's adoption is because the birth mother drank too much? Or that a note believed to be from a birth parent actually contains the warm wishes of an orphanage director who fabricated the same note for all children living in a

particular orphanage? What do you do when learning your daughter's birthday is actually six months before the one she was given or that your son still has 3 siblings living with the birth parents in Guatemala? Life just got more complicated.

If your child is still little, then you are the one to make the emotional adjustment. But how do you handle new information when your child is eight or nine? What about conflicting information? Suddenly everything that you (and your child) believed to be true—is either only partially true or completely false. What can your child believe or trust about his story now? Here are some suggestions for handling situations about new or changing information:

- First of all, as the grownup, it's your job to come to terms with whatever you learn. Deal with your emotions. Even as you read this article, plan on having a crisis occur at some point in your child's life. Plan for it by expecting your child to seek information and also to question the accuracy of it all — especially if some of it has turned out to be incorrect.
- Predict and prepare accordingly. How might my child handle this? Is this potentially traumatic information? Will these 'life facts' have traumatic impact on my child? Follow your gut instincts and remember that you are the expert on your child.
- Separate your feelings from your child's. Remember that your child has his/her own feelings and reactions. We parents should sort through ours so that we don't project them onto our children. For example, our children might have anger about something that saddens us and we have to be ready to react to *their* feelings. Or, they might be much *less* impacted than we anticipate. We need to honor and validate their feelings and having sorted through our own first will make this much easier.
- Do your homework. Find out if the information you do have is absolutely accurate. What is the proof? If there is a possible nuance due to translation? If so, proceed cautiously and conservatively. Discuss the impact of translation and explain why new or changed information has emerged. Possible phrases to use are: *“According to the papers” or “Sometimes the words in one language don't mean the same in another language....”*

Expect all involved to go through a grieving process when new information emerges or previous information proves to be untrue. Your child has just 'lost' a chunk of their life

foundation and a belief and a piece of identity they have had. It is an emotional jolt. Expect regression. Give your child as much control as possible and remember: the following

- Have faith that time heals. At some point this new information will get smoothly integrated into your child's psyche and story. It's a lifelong process.
- Not healing soon enough? Maybe it's time to connect with a competent adoption/trauma child therapist. Even if you just need a short-term piece of work.
- Add a new page to the lifebook to reflect the truth and honor it as the source where all known information will be shared (at age-appropriate times). Acknowledge the change of information. Here are a few examples:

"We thought you were born on June 22nd 2001. Now the doctor tests show that you are six months older. Wow. That's a big change. So we talked and talked about what to do. You decided you wanted to keep the same birthday."

"Sometimes people say or do things to make someone else feel better. Even with adoption information. Your Orphanage Director gave us a note that was supposed to be from your Chinese Mother. But now we know that the Director gave every U.S. family the same note. That's too bad. I wish your note had really been from your birthmother."

With regards to tough issues such as alcoholism, parental drug abuse, mental health issues, criminal activities or incarceration know that these issues are nothing new to many of the folks adopting children via the US foster care system. There are established ways based on your child's age and development to discuss a complicated birth and early life history.

For several detailed example of ways to phrase and reframe difficult issues refer to my book *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* (pages 46-59). Jayne Schooler and Betsy Keefer also have an excellent book called *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*. Her book contains many reframes offered for different developmental stages.

As you continue on this journey, consider the following:

- Allow children to experience their emotions. Normalize what they are feeling. Sometimes you have to sit back and watch without trying to fix or minimize their feelings.
- Remember that children are resilient and will get through whatever they are experiencing.
- Denial can be a wonderful thing. We all have our own schedule of healing and processing.
- Congratulate yourself for having the courage to help your children find their truth!

By Beth O'Malley, M.Ed. Copyright ©2005 by Beth O'Malley

Ms. O'Malley is an adoptee, adoptive mom, adoption social worker, and the author of *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*. Sign up for free lifebook lessons and a monthly newsletter at www.adoptionlifebooks.com/signup.htm. Visit her website at www.adoptionlifebooks.com

Additional Resources

Karen's Adoption Links

This website contains International birth family search resources and Sibling Registries for both adoptive parents and adult adoptees <http://www.karensadoptionlinks.com/>

Birth Parent Contact list:

This list is for those who have adopted internationally and are contemplating birthfamily contact. It is also for those who have already established contact with their child's birth parents or family. Contains comprehensive list of professional searchers for Cambodia, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Also info on finding siblings in various countries. List is moderated and members are screened initially.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BirthParentContact/>

International Birth Search Issues list:

This list is for parents of international adoptees who would like to discuss the issues related to searching for their child's birth family. This new list is focused on DNA testing issues, sibling searches, and abandoned children and is especially relevant for China adoptive families.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/InternationalBirthSearchIssues/>

Sister Far list:

This is a list for parents of internationally adopted children who have found (or suspect that they have found) a biological sibling or twin.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sisterfar/>

International Adoption Search Website

(Ukraine, Russia, Belarus or Kazakhstan)

www.internationaladoptionsearch.com Adoptee and adoptive parent Anna Sternad is the US contact for families interested in searching or maintaining contact with birth families in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Kazakhstan.