

Chapter 8

International Adoption

Introduction

International adoption trends are ever-changing. At their peak, the number of children adopted from other countries was more than 20,000 per year. Despite a recent downturn, a large number of internationally adopted children are now making their way through the early intervention and school systems in the United States. Many of the adoptees were adopted as infants, but there are also many children who were adopted after living in orphanages or with their birth families for some time.

Speech-language pathologists evaluating and treating internationally adopted children may be faced with questions regarding the unique circumstances of international adoption. Since the publication of the first edition of the Talk with Me manual, there has been a significant increase in the amount of research conducted and published regarding the speech and language development of internationally adopted children. This section contains reviews of some of this research as well as resources for use by speech-language pathologists and special education teams.

Considerations for Speech-Language Evaluation and Treatment of Internationally Adopted Children

The communication needs of internationally adopted children represent a relatively new area of research, beginning with the publication of a seminal study by Sharon Glennen and M. Gay Masters in 2002. The majority of published studies concern communication skills of those adopted from China and Eastern Europe, although there are a few studies that include children from other countries as well. Sample sizes for some of these studies have been small. Nevertheless, the body of research has grown substantially since 2002 and has been largely consistent in its findings and across populations. The findings regarding the ability of children adopted internationally to catch up with same-age peers have been encouraging.

Typical language development in internationally adopted children

Children adopted internationally experience a unique language learning situation. Most are first exposed to the language of their country of birth, followed by an

abrupt language “switch” at adoption. Indeed, many have described this experience as learning a “second first language.” The vast majority of internationally adopted children are never bilingual language learners because functional use of the birth language is very quickly lost, before acquisition of English has reached age-level expectations. Language loss in children adopted from Russia has been studied and extremely fast rates of language attrition reported. Dr. Boris Gindis reports that when children are adopted into English-only family environments, children under 4 years of age lose expressive abilities in the first language within 7 to 12 weeks of adoption.

For seven-year-old children, language loss takes an average of 3 months and even for nine year olds with some literacy skills in the birth language, functional language loss happens within 6 months of adoption (Gindis, 2009). Because the birth language usually is of no value for communication with the new family, even older children who already understand and speak the birth language typically stop using it upon adoption.

Therefore, using an interpreter or testing children in the birth language is not recommended once the transition to the adoptive family is complete. This presents a dilemma for speech-language pathologists faced with evaluating a recently adopted child. The question of what is typical English language development and how best to predict which children will have lasting language learning difficulties is the subject of much of the speech-language research with internationally adopted children.

The literature indicates that language and speech structures are acquired in largely the same sequence as is found in monolingual non-adopted children. It does not appear that native language transfer or interference plays much of a role in the acquisition of English in children adopted as infants and toddlers (Glennen & Tracy, 2005). For those adopted prior to 12 months of age, the **rate** of acquisition also appears to be the same as in monolingual children. For those adopted at later ages, particularly after 24 months (a common division point between “early adoptees” and “later adoptees” in the literature), there may be a lag in the acquisition of syntactic structures, but the sequence remains consistent with that of monolingual peers, and children catch up within a relatively short period of time.

Children adopted when they are under the age of two have typically scored within the average range on measures of English comprehension and production compared with non-adopted peers within one year of adoption (Glennen & Masters, 2002; Roberts, et al, 2005; Glennen, 2005). Children adopted later (after 24 months of age) have more to learn in order to catch up with same-age peers, but they appear to acquire linguistic structures at a faster pace than their younger adopted cohorts (Pollock, 2005). The vast majority of internationally adopted children have been found to catch up to non-adopted peers within two years of adoption, although minor delays with expressive language may persist.

Development of phonology in English has also been studied and articulation skills have been found to be within expectations for English speakers within the first months post-adoption. Therefore, children with significant difficulties with articulation or phonology should be referred for evaluation.

Speech and Language Evaluation of Internationally Adopted Children

When evaluating internationally adopted children, it is critical to consider the child's age at time of adoption, amount of time that has passed since adoption, hearing and middle ear status and any available information regarding early medical history or other circumstances. The rate of chronic middle ear fluid and hearing loss has been found to be high in this population. Hearing should be closely monitored as there are many reports of children with chronic middle ear problems without obvious symptoms (Hwa-Froelich, 2009).

For children being seen within the first year after adoption, consideration of the pre-adoption environment is important. Much research has documented developmental delays related to environmental deprivation in institutional care settings. The quality of care and interaction in orphanages varies widely. If a child's pre-adoption environment is known to have been less than optimal, some early delays can be expected, proportional to the amount of time spent in that environment (Glennen, 2002). However, current evidence suggests that an enriched environment upon adoption quickly begins to counteract lost potential and rapid gains can be measured (Roberts, et al, 2005).

A number of studies cited in this resource guide have examined the validity of standardized tests for evaluating internationally adopted children. Although there are some subtle variations in findings, the researchers all seem to concur that by two years post-adoption, children adopted as infants and toddlers, as a group, are performing at or above average on standardized measures of receptive and expressive language skills. Therefore, it appears that standardized tests of overall language skills can be reliably used as part of an evaluation once the child has been with the adoptive family for two or more years.

Screening and evaluation in the first two years after adoption is more challenging. Due to the risk factors faced by many internationally adopted children and the importance of early intervention for those who need it, professionals cannot responsibly recommend waiting to evaluate until two years after adoption. The literature is increasingly stressing the importance of early screening to "catch" those children who will have persistent learning difficulties that require intervention. Because of the lack of information about what is typical and a high level of parent concern regarding communication skills in the early stages post-adoption, surveys have indicated that the rate of speech-language intervention has been higher than the incidence of true communication disorders

(Glennen, 2007). Given the challenge of early and accurate identification of the need for speech-language intervention, the current literature supports the following evaluation methods during the first two years post-adoption.

1. Use parent report tools to screen and monitor speech-language skills.

Close monitoring of change in language skills in the months following adoption can be accomplished using parent report tools. Parents tend to refer their children for evaluation early after adoption, citing speech and language as their chief concern. Physicians tend to refer later than parents, but research indicates that they are often more accurate in terms of estimating actual need (Krakow, 2005). Though parents' level of anxiety regarding their child's communication skills is not always indicative of the child's actual communication skills, parents are accurate reporters when asked to list those linguistic structures that their child uses (Geren, et al, 2005). Thus parent report has been validated as a reliable way to monitor growth in language skills. See [Appendix 8A](#) for a chart of clinical guidelines for early language milestones (vocabulary development and use of two word phrases) taken from the work of Glennen and Masters. These guidelines can be used to compare parent report for a particular child with a group of internationally adopted children. See also [Appendix 8B](#) for a handout on language development written for parents adopting internationally.

2. Compare children to internationally adopted peers:

Researchers have used their findings to develop 'local norms' for internationally adopted children. Using these norms can be somewhat complex because there is not one set of norms that can be used with all internationally adopted children. The norms were developed using a specific set of evaluation tools and the norming samples are grouped by age at adoption and country or region of origin. Readers are referred to the articles cited in this guide for help in developing an evaluation battery which would allow the use of the normative data currently available. For example, Sharon Glennen has developed specific guidelines for evaluating children adopted at 11-23 months of age starting at two months after adoption using measures of pre-linguistic social communication skills and understanding of vocabulary (Glennen, 2007). The article ***Speech and Language Mythbusters for Internationally Adopted Children*** (cited below) also contains a helpful table and two charts presenting referral guidelines and norms based on Glennen's research.

Based on the available evidence, readers are cautioned against comparing internationally adopted children to other culturally and linguistically diverse learners. As mentioned above, internationally adopted children are not typical

bilingual language learners, and most are adopted into majority-culture households.

Intervention with Internationally Adopted Children

Although internationally adopted children as a group catch up quickly in regards to communication skills in English, many individual children do present with significant needs that require intervention. In one study employing the guidelines developed using normative data for internationally adopted children Glennen found that 6 of the 27 children in the study (22 percent) would be referred for speech-language intervention (Glennen, 2007). The majority of the literature to date focuses on typical development and evaluation. Deborah Hwa-Froelich, a speech-language pathologist and associate professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders who founded the International Adoption Clinic at St. Louis University has taken a lead in considering implications for intervention. Readers are referred to her Website <http://iac-stl.slu.edu> and her 2009 presentation titled ***Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Internationally Adopted Children*** for more information. Hwa-Froelich has studied the international adoption research from other fields regarding social-emotional development, attachment, and family dynamics. Her intervention considerations focus on the interaction of social-emotional and relational development with communication skills. Her article: ***Development after Adoption and Referral Recommendations for Internationally Adopted Children*** guides practitioners in the referral and evaluation in all areas of development. http://www.slu.edu/Documents/arts_sciences/communication_sciences_disorders/Developmental%20Milestones%20and%20Recommendationsx.pdf

Consideration of cultural influences may be important with children adopted at older ages in the early stages post-adoption. For example, practitioners cannot assume awareness of mainstream cultural elements. The “culture” of therapy, in which adults “play” with children and children are often reinforced for complying with requests to produce certain linguistic structures, may be new to them. Also, practitioners working with internationally adopted children may find families to be highly vested in their child’s intervention, perhaps requesting a level of involvement not commonly seen in families of non-adopted children. Psychosocial factors should also be considered. Attachment issues, which may manifest in inappropriate levels of affection or withdrawal from interventionists and others, are a primary concern of families after adoption. In addition, birth-family medical and psychological history is often lacking, which could potentially mask the presence of organic psychological conditions.

There is a need for more research into the factors that may impact intervention success with internationally adopted children. It may seem natural to assume that because children are acquiring English with native-like proficiency the adoption history is no longer impacting development or learning. Awareness and sensitivity to the potential differences is a necessary first step towards successful

intervention. In addition, awareness of factors such as family dynamics, child's self-concept, child's psychological condition, etc. could have implications for the child's motivation and compliance in the therapy room and classroom.

See **Appendix 8C** for Reference list.

Resources on International Adoption

Books

One Child, Two Languages

This book, which is included in Chapter 1 of this Talk With Me manual contains one chapter that pertains to internationally adopted children. Chapter Eleven (pages 185-201), "What to Expect, How to Help," contains information on gathering background information, doing language evaluations and the role of the classroom teacher in helping internationally adopted children to develop their language skills. There is also a chart that shows what can be expected at different ages in terms of English acquisition based on the age at adoption.

Tabors, P.O. (2008). *One Child, Two Languages: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators of Children Learning English as a Second Language (2nd Edition)*. Baltimore: Brookes.

Multicultural Students with Special Language Needs

This manual, which is also included in Chapter 1, contains a section (pages 393-401) on providing services to internationally adopted children. Background information about trends in adoption and a summary of relevant research, sections on cognitive development and recommendations for assessing internationally adopted children are included.

Roseberry-McKibbin, C., (2008). *Multicultural Students with Special Language Needs (3rd ed.)*. Oceanside, CA: Academic Communication Associates.

Supporting Development in Internationally Adopted Children **NEW**

This is an evidence-based resource to help professionals fully understand the development of children adopted from abroad, make appropriate recommendations and referrals, and choose interventions that ensure the best outcomes. This book provides information to help professionals recognize how the developmental milestones of internationally adopted children may differ from those of other children, increase the accuracy in referring internationally adopted children for further developmental assessments and services, understand the relationship between development, health care, social interaction, and cultural values, and discover effective intervention strategies for each developmental area.

Hwa-Froelich, D. (2011) *Supporting Development in Internationally Adopted Children*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
<http://products.brookespublishing.com/Supporting-Development-in-Internationally-Adopted-Children-P147.aspx>

Articles

Speech and Language “Mythbusters” for Internationally Adopted Children

The full text of this article can be viewed online and is an extremely helpful resource for speech-language pathologists who are new to working with internationally adopted children. In this easy-to-read article, one of the leading speech-language pathology researchers in the area of International Adoption addresses seven myths surrounding the speech and language development of internationally adopted children and provides evidence that can guide clinical decision-making. A table and two charts are available to view and print. The table provides specific guidance on what to look for when screening language skills and when to refer for speech and language evaluation. The charts present normative data for children adopted from Eastern Europe that can be used as comparison data for evaluations.

Glennen, S. (2008, Dec. 16). Speech and language "mythbusters" for internationally adopted children. *The ASHA Leader*, 13(17), 10-13.
<http://www.asha.org/Publications/leader/2008/081216/f081216a/>

Treating Clefts in Older Children: A Focus on Children Adopted Internationally

This article was written by members of Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare's craniofacial team. This team provides pre-adoption consultation and post-adoption services for families adopting children with clefts or other craniofacial anomalies.

Wood, R., Cermin, C., Collier, J.D, Cordero, K., & Shell, C. (2009). Treating Clefts in Older Children: A Focus on Children Who Are Adopted Internationally. *Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare: A Pediatric Perspective*, 18: 1, 1-5.
<http://www.gillettechildrens.org/FileUpload/Vol18No1.pdf>

Research Articles

The following articles were chosen to represent the most easily accessible and clinically focused research currently available on the subject of appropriate evaluation and intervention for young internationally adopted children. Direct links to the abstracts are provided so that the reader may quickly review the findings and conclusions. The studies included were designed to provide practicing professionals with evidence upon which to base clinical decisions. The full text of many of these articles is also available online to speech-language

pathologists who are members of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA).

Language Development and Delay in Internationally Adopted Infants and Toddlers: A review.

This tutorial was one of the very first publications written specifically for practicing speech-language pathologists about the unique situation of international adoption. As the author embarked on this new area of research in the field of speech-language pathology, this article served to define the clinical challenges involved when professionals are faced with evaluating internationally adopted children. Although much has been learned from the research that has followed, the background information reviewed remains relevant. This work is widely cited in the subsequent literature.

Glennen, S. (2002). Language Development and Delay in Internationally Adopted Infants and Toddlers: A review. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11, 333-339. <http://ajslp.asha.org/cgi/content/abstract/11/4/333>

Typical and Atypical Language Development in Infants and Toddlers Adopted From Eastern Europe.

This was the first study of language development in internationally adopted children published in a major journal to inform the practice of speech-language pathologists. With the findings, Glennen and Masters developed preliminary clinical guidelines for evaluating and making treatment recommendations. (See Appendix 8A for a chart summarizing the guidelines). Although a significant body of literature has been published since, the clinical guidelines proposed in this article have generally been confirmed and remain relevant.

Glennen, S. & Masters, M.G. (2002). Typical and Atypical Language Development in Infants and Toddlers Adopted From Eastern Europe. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 11, 417-433. <http://ajslp.asha.org/cgi/content/abstract/12/1/15>

Predicting Language Outcomes for Internationally Adopted Children

This article is ideal for speech-language pathologists attempting to develop an evaluation 'protocol' for use with children adopted between 11 and 23 months of age. This article is based on a previous study published in 2005 in which children were tested starting at 2-4 months post adoption. It follows the same children one year, post-adoption, in order to determine the validity of the guidelines. From the findings, clinical guidelines are proposed regarding which children should receive early language intervention.

Glennen, S. (2007). Predicting Language Outcomes for Internationally Adopted Children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 50, 529-548. <http://jslhr.asha.org/cgi/content/abstract/50/2/529>

Language Development in Preschool-Age Children Adopted From China

This study was conducted by a group of researchers working specifically with children adopted as infants and toddlers from China. They were interested in how the children would perform on standardized language measures after being in their permanent homes for two years or longer.

Roberts, J., Pollock, K., Krakow, R., Price, J., Fulmer, K., & Wang, P. (2005) Language Development in Preschool-Age Children Adopted From China. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 48, 93-107.
<http://jslhr.asha.org/cgi/content/abstract/48/1/93>

Topics in Language Disorders-Volume 29-Issue 1. Language Risk, Adaptation, and Resilience: Children Adopted From Abroad The January/March 2009 issue of the journal Topics in Language Disorders is dedicated to the subject of language in internationally adopted children. This issue includes a foreword by Deborah Hwa-Froelich and six articles. Although the full text of these articles requires a subscription or purchase, the abstracts can be viewed by following the link below, and the articles may be purchased on a pay-per-view basis online.

Topics in Language Disorders. 29(1), 32-49.
<http://journals.lww.com/topicsinlanguagedisorders> (select Jan/Mar 2009 on previous issues tab)

Web Resources

Minnesota International Adoption Project Website

The International Adoption Project is dedicated to conducting research to “develop a clear picture of the successes, challenges and perhaps unmet needs of international adoptees and their families.” This project, which is housed at the University of Minnesota’s Institute of Child Development, maintains a parent registry whereby over 5000 children are registered for participation in current and future research. The project coordinates numerous research endeavors, including studies involving social communication and language development in internationally adopted children. The yearly newsletters provide a description of the studies in progress and a summary of current findings. Although the research is not specifically oriented to early childhood education themes, the findings may be of interest to professionals attempting to understand the broader issues impacting young internationally adopted children. The newsletters can be accessed directly by following the second link. **Temporarily unavailable.**

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/icd/IAP/Publications/default.html>

<http://www.cehd.umn.edu/icd/IAP/Newsletters/default.html>

St. Louis University International Adoption Clinic Website

This International Adoption Clinic is unique in the country in that its coordinator, Deborah Hwa-Froelich, is a speech-language pathologist. Its stated mission is to “provide evidence-based developmental services to families and their adopted children.” The clinic offers evaluations and intervention in communication, language and literacy, social-emotional development, play behaviors and hearing. A link on the website titled *Development and Recommendations* leads to a printable 3 page summary of Hwa-Froelich’s longitudinal study of 28 internationally adopted children. Lists of her publications and presentations are included as well as a complete international adoption bibliography. Hwa-Froelich’s work also provides valuable information on effective intervention with internationally adopted children.

<http://iac-stl.slu.edu>

Center for Cognitive-Developmental Evaluation and Remediation Website

Dr. Boris Gindis is a Russian psychologist who founded this Center in Nanuet, New York to provide psychological services specifically for internationally adopted children. The Center now provides speech-language and educational evaluations as well, and the Website contains extensive information about educational issues and international adoption. Dr. Gindis has published a variety of articles that can be accessed directly through the Website. There is a link to the International Adoption Articles Directory with a database of more than 650 online articles organized by topic, including many related to speech-language and other educational themes.

www.bgcenter.com

International Adoption and Language Development

In working with adoptive parents, it is important to recognize that they are often seeking and receiving advice from many sources and are highly vested in helping their child overcome any obstacles they face. This article found on the Adoption.com Library Website at www.library.adoption.com is included as one example of the information that parents may be reading about speech and language development. Through this article, parents are encouraged to seek speech-language evaluations and services. The author states that delays may exist in the native language due to the documented effects of institutionalization. Parents are cautioned that they may need to be persistent because many professionals still believe that any delays are transitional in nature due to the switch of languages upon adoption.

<http://library.adoption.com/articles/international-adoption-and-language-development.html>

Power Point Slides available to view online:

Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Internationally Adopted Children

Go to **Appendix 8D** to view the Power Point slides from Deborah Hwa-Froelich and Kelly Harris' presentation at the Missouri Speech-Language Hearing Association conference on March 6, 2009. The slides give an up-to-date synopsis of the research, although it can be difficult to follow if one is new to the information since it was designed to accompany a live presentation. The authors provide significant information about intervention with internationally adopted children which makes this presentation unique.

Hwa-Froelich, D. A., and Harris, K. (2009). Assessment and Intervention Strategies for Internationally Adopted Children. Invited presentation for the Missouri Speech-Language-Hearing Association, St. Louis, MO.

Language Development in Post-Institutionalized Children

The handouts from Lisa Schoenbrodt's 2007 presentation at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) Convention can be viewed online. One will find a summary of the results of a study of forty-eight children ages 3-16 who were adopted from Eastern European orphanages. This presentation is unique among the resources highlighted in this guide in that the study focused on longer term outcomes (children were all at least one year post adoption before starting the study and were followed for three years). It is included here because preschool aged children were included, and information is presented about the pragmatic features of language that have been found to lag behind in internationally adopted children into the school-age years. Educators are advised to watch carefully for difficulties with non-literal and pragmatic language that put children at risk academically and socially.

Schoenbrodt, L. (2007). Language Development in Post-Institutionalized Children. Invited presentation for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Boston, MA. #1792

<http://search.asha.org/default.aspx?q=Language%20Development%20in%20Post-Institutionalized%20Children>

Professional Development on International Adoption

Assessment and Intervention for Internationally Adopted Children

This audio CD and manual is available for .2 CEUs until 11-2-2012, through the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Sharon Glennen, a leading researcher in the area of speech and language development in internationally adopted children, first presents background information on

international adoption trends. She then reviews research regarding the impact of orphanage care on development which leads her to the subject of her research: What happens after adoption? A number of studies designed to help practitioners understand what is 'typical' in this population are reviewed with specific attention to clinical implications. Dr. Glennen addresses questions related to what practitioners and parents can expect within the first few months after adoption as well as what research has shown so far in relationship to longer term outcomes and what they mean for evaluation and treatment of school-aged children.

<http://www.asha.org/eweb/OLSDynamicPage.aspx?title=Assessment%20and%20Intervention%20for%20Internationally%20Adopted%20Children&webcode=olsdetails>