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Internationally adopted kids and language learning

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Abstract

Most families who live and adopt internationally face the decision of which language(s) their children should learn. Languages are a critical aspect of international adoption. Adopted kids need to shift from their native language to their “adoptive” language as part of the overall emotional adaptation. This shift needs to happen quite rapidly for them to be able to communicate particularly at the level of the family. The objective is to review the current practices, methodologies, research and some success stories on language learning for internationally adopted children. Make some recommendations and conclusions for parents and practitioners both to help the linguistic and emotional adaptation of internationally adopted children. Approximately 88% of children who have been adopted internationally have spent time in institutional care¹. Most of these children show a remarkable resilience when it comes to language development. The research talks about “a spectacularly rapid acquisition” of their new home language, for most children. Patterns of international adoption have changed with the overall numbers of inter-country adoptions declining over the years. And now the age at which children are being adopted tends to be older. This means that they will have spent more time in orphanages or foster homes before coming home. Studies show that:

- a) Within a few years post-adoption children’s language skills are in line with their non-adopted peers. For example, Glennen (2015) found that children adopted at ages 1 and 2 reached expected language abilities for their age within 15 months of adoption. Children adopted at age 3 reached age-level expectations after*

¹ Julian, M. M. (2013). Age at adoption from institutional care as a window into the lasting effects of early experiences. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 16, 101-145.

2 years of exposure to their new language, and children adopted at age 4 met expectations after 3 years of exposure.

- b) But later in life as the language demands in school increase, the language skills of children who are adopted internationally can fall behind their peers.*
- c) This means that it is important to keep an eye on your child's language development especially as they progress through school. This may be particularly important if your child tested in the low average range for language development when they were a toddler as they may be at a particular risk for language problems when they start school.*

Structuring a language learning curriculum and methodology for internationally adopted kids represents a very personalized choice the parents along with the teachers will have to make. In general, studies show that internationally adopted children will speak later but it is important to expose them to as many languages as the family will consider relevant not only for the child development but also for the longer-term opportunities considering the family linguistic framework. It is important to take family age into consideration. Some learning strategies will be shared in appendix to the article.

Adopted kids and languages

Context

Most families who live and adopt internationally face the decision of which language(s) their children should learn. Languages are a critical aspect of international adoption. Adopted kids need to shift from their *native* language to their “*adoptive*” language as part of the overall emotional adaptation. This shift needs to happen quite rapidly for them to be able to communicate particularly at the level of the family².

As a professional and adopting mother, I have lived internationally for over 20 years. Italian is my first language; English is my working language and main language of my biological son's school curriculum. I have lived in a French speaking country (as well as multinational environment) for almost 10 years. Our nanny speaks Spanish (as well as my son and myself) and Portuguese is my fifth along with Thai (few words).

I have a passion for multilinguistic environments as a means to develop from a linguistic and personal point of view.

Some facts:

Approximately 88% of children who have been adopted internationally have spent time in institutional care³. Most of these children show a remarkable resilience when it comes to language development. The research talks about “a spectacularly rapid acquisition” of their new home language, for most children.

Patterns of international adoption have changed with the overall numbers of inter-country adoptions declining over the years. And now the age at which children are being adopted tends to be older. This means that they will have spent more time in orphanages or foster homes before coming home.

When children come home they experience a period of rapid change. They're now exposed to new people, new climate, new home, new routine, new food etc. As well as this, they're exposed to a new language: the language of the home which is usually not their mother tongue. In other words, children have been exposed to their mother tongue up until they come home and then their exposure to the home language stops abruptly. As a result, they

² The communication, especially at the beginning, is a combination of language and signs.

³ Ref. Glennen, S. L. 2007. Predicting language outcomes for internationally adopted children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 50, 529-548

“loose” the mother tongue quite rapidly. It’s replaced with exposure to the new language. This is called a second first language. Your child is learning a first language for the second time. It is a unique language learning situation.

The purpose of language in early childhood is to form connections with loved ones and to communicate your needs. So when they are learning the new language, they’re also engaged in forming an attachment with you. Language and communication play an important role in the development of this attachment.

Being a tuned in communicator, using both words and nonverbal communication like facial expression and gestures, help form your attachment with your child.

Studies show that:

1. Within a few years post-adoption children’s language skills are in line with their non-adopted peers. For example, Glennen (2015) found that children adopted at ages 1 and 2 reached expected language abilities for their age within 15 months of adoption. Children adopted at age 3 reached age-level expectations after 2 years of exposure to their new language, and children adopted at age 4 met expectations after 3 years of exposure.
2. But later in life as the language demands in school increase, the language skills of children who are adopted internationally can fall behind their peers.
3. This means that it is important to keep an eye on your child’s language development especially as they progress through school. This may be particularly important if your child tested in the low average range for language development when they were a toddler as they may be at a particular risk for language problems when they start school.

Here’s what else the research evidence says so far:

Essentially it shows that children who are internationally adopted make significant gains in acquiring their new home language in spite of their early experiences in orphanages or baby homes.

Generally, the research shows that by 4 years after coming home, most children who were adopted internationally score within the normal range on standardized tests of languages or checklists that parents complete⁴. Children who are adopted internationally tend to go through vocabulary growth spurts just like children who are not adopted internationally. Language comprehension or understanding of language tends to reach age-expected levels of development more quickly than expressive language (words, sentences, and grammar)⁵.

But the good news is that the majority of children who are internationally adopted, when given enough exposure and meaningful communication opportunities in the new home language, make remarkable language progress especially in their first year home. For children who are adopted before age 2, the language transition is smooth with most children eventually developing speech and language skills that are average for their age. And rapid gains are made in the first two years after they come home. Older children may take longer to catch up as they have more catching up to do. But there are lots of gaps in the research.

⁴ This is compared with children who are learning language from their biological parents.

⁵ There is research showing that children adopted from South Korea and China tend to have better outcomes than children adopted from countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America. And children raised in foster homes tend to have better outcomes than children raised in orphanages.

Language as a vehicle of emotions and culture and not only communication. Language as a Family Skill.

Communication in the new language is considered a means and mechanism for the child to build connections, including emotional so learning the new language and attachment strongly overlap.

Research: Patricia Kuhl University of Washington: “by 6 months of age a child is already primed to hear certain sounds and expect certain structures of speech based on what he / she has heard in the environment. Even if internationally adopted children seem to recognize some words and sentences this is mainly because they try to make sense out of the social context / environment of the meaning rather than because they really understand from a linguistic perspective.

Social language learning and use is different from academic or school language. It takes from 5 to 7 years to achieve the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency under normal conditions. In addition to this challenge, internationally adopted children when going to kindergarten or school change social context and require to make sense of new words. It is important for parents to anticipate some of these words etc. with practical demos.

Mid-term choices: how many languages at home

There are short, mid and long term choices that parents need to make when it comes to languages for their internationally adopted kids. Which language speak to them (in case there is more than one native language at home for the two parents), which language close family and friends preferably need to adopt when meeting them and speaking to them for the first time and / or regularly, school/ kindergarten language etc. What decision when it comes to continuing or not their native language? To answer to this question, it is critical for the parents to take the age variations of their child development into account: if the child has substantially already been exposed or not to native language and or any other language (ex. fostering parents etc.) this may affect the decision on how to deal with the acquisition / learning which has already happened.

Conclusions

Very personal choice needs to be adapted to the family context and the situation of the child (cognitive etc.). They will speak later but it is important to expose them to as many languages as the family will consider relevant not only for the child development but also for the longer term opportunities taking into account the family linguistic framework. It is important to take family age into consideration (ex. a child adopted when he was 5 years old and started to learn social English when he was 7 but he would only learn academic English when he was 10).

Some learning Strategies (APPENDIX)

Pronounce words clearly, separately and slowly. Your child’s brain is prepared to hear some sounds but not others. Ex. Asian languages lack the sound “r”.

Repeat and emphasize key words.

Use physical examples to examples to explain a concept or idea.

Use multiple forms of communication including signs, gestures, facial expressions and pantomime.

Focus the majority of the conversations on what a child does and feels or on immediate events so that he/she can understand / learn.

Avoid long words (replace them with shorter and simpler).

Avoid ambiguous or vague and marathon questions/long sentences.

Starts with basic numbers, colors, days of the week.

Rely on teaching materials or pre-schools (ESL).

Teach “first, second, last”= the concept of sequence. Ex. Tell the story of the day (breakfast, etc. until bed time). This contributes also to a sense of security.

Teach cause and effect in daily life. Ex. Turn light on and off with pressing bottom.

Early language assessment should be as standard assessment as an initial pediatric check up because nearly all children adopted internationally have some speech and / or language issues.

If a child does not make progress in the short term is because he / she is focusing on other issues related to the adaptation.

Inspired by:

Glennen, S. L. 2007. Predicting language outcomes for internationally adopted children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 50, 529-548.

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Glennen S., (2015). Internationally Adopted Children in the Early School Years: Relative Strengths and Weaknesses in Language Abilities. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools* 46: 1-13.

[Internationally Adopted Children in the Early School Years: Relative Strengths and Weaknesses in Language Abilities | Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools \(asha.org\)](#)

This study aimed to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses in language and verbal short-term memory abilities of school-age children who were adopted from Eastern Europe.

Children adopted between 1;0 and 4;11 (years;months) of age were assessed with the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—Preschool, Second Edition (CELF-P2) and the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals, Fourth Edition (CELF-4) at age 5 and ages 6–7. Language composites and subtests were compared across time.

All CELF–P2 and CELF–4 mean scores fell in the average range. Age of adoption did not correlate to test scores.

Eastern European adoptees had average scores on a variety of language tests. Vocabulary was a relative strength; enriching the environment substantially improved this language area. Verbal short-term memory and expressive grammar were relative weaknesses. Children learning a language later in life may have difficulty with verbal short-term memory, which leads to weaknesses in expressive syntax and grammar

Asian adopted children specific: When adopted children forget their birth language, it may not be lost without a trace (theconversation.com)

(PDF) Internationally Adopted Children in the Early School Years: Relative Strengths and Weaknesses in Language Abilities (researchgate.net)

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Categories: Child Parent Communication / *Tags:* Brid McAndrews, inter-country adoption, international adoption, language delay, language development, Mary-Pat O Malley / Permalink

Relevant Education

<https://nacac.org/advocate/nacacs-positions/educational-needs/>

<https://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Meeting-the-needs-of-adopted-and-permanently-placed-children-A-guide-for-school-staff.pdf>

<http://tessani.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/LetsLearnTogetherNI-locked.pdf>

<http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/childrens-guide-to-adoption-four-different-guides/>

<http://talknua.com/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-language-development-in-children-who-are-adopted-internationally/>