



Lost in Translation: Language Deficits in International Adoption

For children adopted internationally, learning their new language becomes something of a survival skill. In most cases, their adoptive parents do not speak their birth language, and so the child has a very strong need to learn a new way to communicate. Once they are in their new home, children receive language stimulation through interaction with parents, siblings, extended family, and friends, as well as play-dates or story time activities.

Yet, parents who have adopted children internationally often wonder about language development; what they need to know prior to bringing their child home, what services they should seek out after their child comes home, and what is and is not normal speech development. Those questions may become more challenging depending on the amount of information you may know about your child and his or her life before coming to you. While record keeping has improved in some countries, both pre- and post-natal, those practices still vary considerably from country to country.

What you might expect

It is common for children who were adopted from another country to have some differences and difficulties with language development after adoption. If a child has good mastery of

their birth language, it can be a good indicator of how they may learn their new language. However, if a child experiences language and speech delays in their birth language, those delays often carry over, and they may struggle to learn their new language.

There are a few different factors that may have an impact on a child's language development:

- **Spending time in an institutional setting.**

Children who have spent time in orphanages may have language delays caused by a lack of external stimulation common in institutionalized settings like orphanages. In many cases, there were not enough caregivers to provide the one-on-one care that young children need to develop their communication skills.

- **Age.** Children who were adopted at a very young age, two years or under, typically lose their birth language

quickly, they begin to learn their new language before their birth language has fully developed. Some children may lose the ability to speak and understand their birth language in a matter of several weeks to several months after arrival in their new country. In many cases, these children will have language skills within normal limits as little as one year post adoption. Older children may need a little more time to develop their new language skills. Even so,



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most children make rapid gains in their new language during the first year post-adoption, if there are no other developmental delays present.

- **Speech delays.** If your child has a documented speech delay in his or her birth language, it is likely that such a delay will also affect how he or she learns this new language. In such cases, you may need to seek out appropriate interventions from a care provider.

How language skills develop

There are two ways children's language develops: *communicative language* and *cognitive language*. *Communicative language* refers to children expressing and communicating their needs with parents or peers. This is the language that is used in every day social situations and interactions. *Cognitive language* refers to a child being able to meet academic, grade-level requirements in a school setting. This is what a child will ultimately need for formal learning, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing about a subject area. In many cases, until your child's English develops more fully, it can be difficult to determine where any gaps lie.



Gathering information

Obtaining any records about your child's developmental history, birth information, or any other documentation that may be available will only benefit your child going forward. Even anecdotal information can be useful! Adoptive parents Becca and Tyler adopted their son, William, from Korea when he was just more than two years old. William was in a foster home before being matched

with Becca and Tyler and, fortunately, the family had access to some records. They knew that William had a speech delay in Korean, and that he had been attending speech therapy weekly. Becca and Tyler know that what documentation they did have was limited, but felt fortunate to have contact information for most of William's doctors and therapists.

Perhaps the caregivers or foster parents who cared for your child can share pieces of information that may help you and your medical provider assess your child's speech and language skills and identify any gaps or challenges. If you are able to, you might also make a recording of a caregiver interacting with your child. From this, you may be able to identify and make note of any language challenges. Such a recording can also be helpful for a speech pathologist who may assess your child's language development post adoption.

Becca and Tyler shared that they asked William's foster mother to fill out a questionnaire about

him; his likes, dislikes, development, etc. It was in Korean, so they asked their social worker to translate it. They had learned some very basic Korean, and they used sign language in addition to English to help William once they returned home. As time went on, Becca and Tyler relied less and less on Korean, until they reached the point when William communicated exclusively in English.

Post-adoption services and supports

Once you and your child are home, many experts recommend having a comprehensive speech language assessment. It is helpful to have this assessment right away, so that the provider can make better recommendations.

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You may even be able to find a speech pathologist who speaks your child's birth language. If that is not an option for your family, experts then recommend having your child evaluated in English. You may wish to begin with a consultation with a speech professional to determine what is best for your individual child.

William's parents sought services and advice from an Adoption Medical Clinic through the University of Minnesota. They met with a doctor and occupational therapist for assessments and lab work. They learned that, in addition to William's speech delay, he also had a vitamin deficiency and Global Development Delay. Those care providers recommended that Becca and Tyler take three to six months to bond with William before seeking out different therapies. They also met with their school district's Early Childhood Special Education department to begin the process of enrolling him in the school's available therapy programs.

Children who were adopted internationally are unique in many ways; their language needs are only one facet of that uniqueness. And, even children who have been in their new country for several years and who had not initially presented with language difficulty, may experience challenges down the road. The good news is that there are some key things that you can do at home to promote your child's healthy speech and language development, including:

- **Play!** Get on your child's level and model and encourage their communication while you are playing. Play games that engage both you and your child.
- **Encourage imitation.** Sing songs with gestures like "Wheels on the Bus" or "Itsy Bitsy Spider." Check out books, videos, or recordings that have neighborhood noises, like animal sounds: "A kitten says *meow*," or "a car sounds *beep-beep*!"
- **Label objects and actions.** Read and look at picture books, pointing to pictures

and saying what they are.

- **Describe what you are doing.** Use simple words to describe what you are doing: "Daddy is cooking food," or "Mommy is giving you a bath."
- **Reinforce your child's progress.** Praising and celebrating your child's progress will encourage them, instead of leaving them feeling frustrated.

Just as every child is unique, so is every family unit. If you need additional guidance or help in finding resources, services, or support for yourself or your child, please reach out to the Coalition.



Resources

From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Raising Resilient Children](#)
- [Attachment and Bonding - Beyond the Surface](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Never Give Up on Hope](#)

Additional Resources

- [International Adoption and Speech-Language Development](#)
- [What Parents Need to Know about Speech-Language Assessment of Older Internationally Adopted Children](#)
- [Speech and Language Myths in Adopted Children](#)
- [Working with Internationally Adopted Children](#)
- [Are These Speech Errors Related to International Adoption?](#)



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