

Foreign-born Adoption Stories

• Keep 'em Reading •

Grades
K-2,3-5

by | Gwynne Spencer

Every year, more than 20,000 children from other countries are adopted by U.S. families, according to Susan Freivalds, executive director of Adoptive Families of America. Almost half of these children are adopted under one year of age, and almost ninety percent are adopted before the age of five. Adoptive parents go out of their way to help nurture knowledge and affiliations with their child's original culture, but often children come into their new family with little or no information about their birth families.

Rethinking Classroom Activities

Some of the more traditional classroom activities have the potential to make the differently adopted child feel overlooked, odd, or even an outsider. The Center for Adoption Support and Education offers adoption programs for teachers that help them adjust school assignments to reflect the diversity that they are likely to find in every classroom. Their materials offer typical question and answer scenarios to address issues like why parents adopt, what is clear and respectful terminology such as avoiding words like "real" and "natural" when referring to parents, "giving up for adoption" and more detailed FAQs. Some concerns revolve around classroom activities that really put the adopted child in awkward situations. Go to www.adoptionsupport.org/pub/index.php and download their free "In the Children's World at School" information sheet.

Displays and Assignments. Classrooms and libraries often develop bulletin boards or displays on assigned writing topics featuring family trees, autobiographies, baby pictures of the students, and other activities that might stymie or even possibly stigmatize a child who was adopted from another culture with little or no information about birth families, genetics, baby pictures, or even a verifiable birth date.



Holidays. Father's Day and Mother's Day can be terrifically unnerving for these kids, some feeling that silence is the only cure for their double dose of genetic diversity. The Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving picture is not a favorite. On the other hand it would be wrong to single out the differently adopted child, so what is the fine line to be toed?

Adaptations

In your classroom activities, a few adaptations can prevent discomfort. A family tree can be changed to a "loving tree" with pictures of the people the child loves and cherishes, not necessarily birth parents. Adding roots to the tree will help many children, not just those adopted from outside of the United States, to appreciate their widely varied family heritages in acknowledgment that family trees have roots and branches.

An alternative to the family tree assignment could be drawing family "houses" that show the relationships between family members. This is a handy way to raise the comfort level for a child who has a many-times-married parent or a number of adopted, or half- and step-siblings. Roads

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and paths can connect the houses. It would also ease the discomfort level of children being raised by grandparents or foster parents.

Instead of a tree, perhaps a set of concentric circles with generations widening out like ripples in a lake would be more illustrative of the diverse background of many children.

The whole point of these classroom units are to help children feel proud of their heritage, their legacy, but most kids who come away from them less than enthusiastic feel singled out as not being “normal.”

Instead of starting their autobiographies with a birth date, how about having students start with a list of memorable events from each year they've been alive?

Cooking up reading may help a varied classroom celebrate diversity through their stomachs. Rather than relying on trees, branches and roots, food may help kids share their heritages proudly. Rosemary Wells' *Yoko* is a great book to help kick off a classroom “family food festival.”

Resources

Editor's Note: The books in this list are divided into “Chinese” and “General” Adoption Stories. However, every book is a useful resource for talking about international adoptions of all kinds.

Chinese Adoption Stories

At Home in This World: A China Adoption Story by Jean MacLeod. EMK Press, 2003. Ages 6–12.

Told in the voice of a nine-year-old, the story tells the child's own understanding of her adoption, and her being of two cultures. More of MacLeod's writing can be found in *Adoptive Families Magazine*, *Adoption Today*, and in *Passage to the Heart*. She has also co-developed a series of parent education workshops on adoptive family issues.

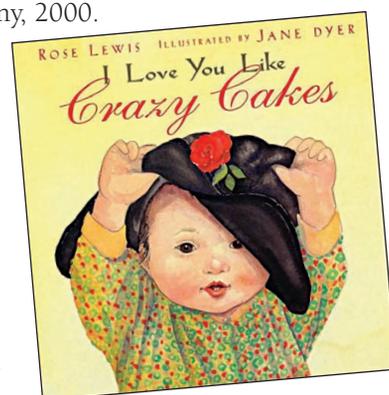


Every Year On Your Birthday by Rose Lewis. Little, Brown and Company, 2007. Ages 3–10. In this continuation of *I Love You Like Crazy Cakes*, children will understand the unique love in the adopted family.

Finding Joy by Marion Coste. Albert Whitman, 2007. Ages 5–10. A Chinese baby's parents decide to abandon her, and an American couple adopt her from the orphanage where she is ultimately placed. This opens the door for discussion of China's one-child policy and its effects, but maintains focus on the child as a gift.

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes by Rose Lewis. Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

Ages 3–9. A loving celebration of the little girl from China who joined the family by airplane, not stork, and made all the difference in the world. Read this to elementary students and they will understand in their hearts the incredible bond in adoptive families.

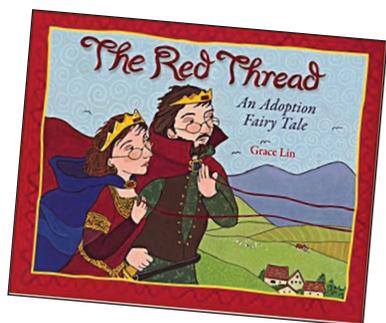


Just Add One Chinese Sister by Patricia McMahon and Conor Clarke McCarthy. Boyd's Mills Press, 2005. Ages 3–12. Conor, the “big brother” joins the narrative voices of mother and Claire and the story they share that tells how Claire came to their family from China. Illustrated as if it were a scrapbook, with memorabilia and photos, illustrations and “journal” entries, this is a terrific story for students of any age.

Kids Like Me In China by Ying Ying Fry, Amy Klatzin, Brian Boyd, and Terry Fry. Yeong and Yeong Book Company, 2001. Ages 5–10. The text was constructed from Ying Ying's journal, audiotapes, videotapes, and interviews with her after she returns to the orphanage in China from which she was adopted. This would be a good impetus to having older children write their own life stories regardless of their origins.

My Mei Mei by Ed Young. Philomel Books, 2006. Ages 4–12. Antonia travels to China with her parents to bring home her “mei mei” (little sister).

The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale by Grace Lin. Albert Whitman, 2007. Ages



4–10. “There is an ancient Chinese belief that an invisible unbreakable red thread connects all those who are destined to be together.” The red thread joins two lonely grown-ups with a faraway baby who awaits them in China.

A Sister for Matthew: A Story About Adoption by Pamela Kennedy and Amy Wummer. Ideals Press, 2006. Ages 4–9. The “big brother” in this story does not get to go to China, but stays with his grandparents.

Waiting for May by Janet Morgan Stoecke, Puffin, 2005. Ages 4–12. The “big brother” shares insights into feelings surrounding May’s adoption from China. Lots of good details about international adoption will help this title span a wide age range of students.

The White Swan Express: A Story About Adoption by Jean Davies Okimoto and Elaine M. Aoki. Clarion Books, 2002. Ages 5–10. Four baby girls from a Chinese orphanage are adopted by four very different families. Great read aloud for elementary grades to get insight into the details of international adoption.

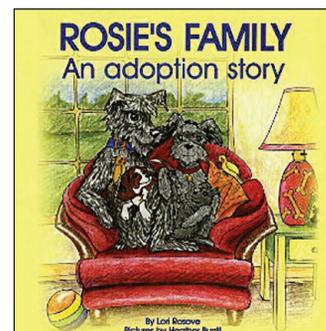
General Adoption Stories

Horace by Holly Keller. Greenwillow Books, 1991. Ages 3–7. Horace, who is spotted, is adopted into a “different” family that is striped. In his search for where he belongs, he finds that how you look is not as important as how you feel in a family.

I Don’t Have Your Eyes by Carrie A. Kitze. EMK Press, 2003. Ages 3–8. A strong story that speaks to the issue of shared traits that bind the human heart.

A Mother for Choco by Keiko Kasza. Putnam, 1992. Ages 3–8. A great title to spark discussion of what is a family as a little bird joins the Bear family.

Rosie’s Family: An Adoption Story by Lori Rosove. Asia Press, 2001. Ages 4–9. Rosie the beagle is adopted into the Schnauzer family. An excellent read aloud for younger children before getting into specifics of inter cultural adoptions.



Online Adoption Resources

The Center for Adoption Support and Education, www.adoptionsupport.org

Adoptive Families Magazine, www.adoptivefamilies.com



Gwynne Spencer is hopelessly in love with children’s books of all kinds. She teaches occasionally at Western Oregon University’s Division of Extended Programs. Contact her at gwynnespencer@aol.com.