The arrival of a new child into the family is an event which extended family and friends are often eager to celebrate and be part of. However, a child coming through intercountry adoption may have different needs and reactions to those of a child arriving through birth. This fact sheet provides some information to help you understand and support the adoptive family. Every child has a unique history and new parents will differ in the ways they choose to manage things, therefore some behaviours of a child or responses by parents described in this fact sheet may not be relevant to your family or friends situation.

The Child's Experience

The baby or child will have experienced many significant changes, some which are unavoidably traumatic, prior to arriving in Australia. This includes the separation from familiar carers, language, food and environment. All children coming into a family through adoption have also experienced the earlier significant loss of their first family. This is a traumatic loss, regardless of the reasons for the separation (relinquishment, removal due to abuse, abandonment or death of their parents). Children are then cared for in foster care or an orphanage and the quality of care a child has received varies considerably. All of these experiences have an impact on how a baby or child feels and reacts to the world around them, including how they will respond to their new parents. New parents may only have limited background information about the child.
Managing Behaviour

Children who have experienced significant transitions and difficult earlier life events may have some behaviours which you may be surprised or confused by. Some of these are described later in this fact sheet. In addition, the child may not respond well to common parenting strategies. The new parents may look like they are ‘spoiling’ a child by not responding to behaviour in a way you expect or which worked with your children. This may be because they have learned to parent in a therapeutic way which facilitates trust and connection. Behaviour management strategies common in Australian parenting such as ‘time-out’, ‘controlled crying’, consequences or using reward charts are often ineffective for children who have spent time not feeling safe and connected to caregivers.

How the new parent might be feeling

Learning to parent a baby or child who has experienced loss and trauma prior to coming in to a family is complex, and often emotionally and physically overwhelming. It is common for adoptive parents to have times where they struggle to cope, feel exhausted, confused and isolated. This is compounded by the lack of understanding by others about the unique challenges in helping a child who has experienced earlier trauma, loss and attachment disruptions – and this includes parents of young children and babies. Although it is well known that mothers who have given birth might experience post-natal distress/depression, it is less well known that distress and/or depression in new adoptive parents is not uncommon. This can be very difficult for new families to experience and receiving understanding and support can make a big difference to a family. Adoptive parents need the same – or more – support than new parents through birth need.
Welcoming the new arrival

The new parents may ask friends and relatives not to visit during the early settling in period. This is because children who have had many carers are not used to being in a family and when a number of adults are coming in to their home it can take longer to understand their parent/s are their special adults. New parents may also need to decline invitations to social gatherings as these may be stressful and overwhelming for a newly adopted child.

Coming to others for affection rather than their parents

Children who have been in an orphanage or had multiple carers are very likely to seek affection and attention from other adults. This is common in children whose experiences have taught them they have no consistent, protecting, caring adult and so for their survival and to receive affection, they have had to endear themselves to whichever adult is around. Children with this history may initially also find it very unsettling to be in a family environment, as they have learned not to trust that the adults they rely on will protect them and be there permanently. As a result, they may actively seek out other adults to ensure someone else will like them enough to care for them if their parents left them. This is a natural survival strategy for a child with this history, but it brings risks to their safety (such as going off with adults they don’t know) and reflects their traumatic history, rather than a healthy emotional space. A good strategy is to redirect them to their parent for a cuddle or help, rather than giving this yourself in the early days.
Clingy Behaviour

It can be helpful to compare a newly adopted child’s behaviour to that of a newborn. They need to learn trust and connection in the same way, as opposed to knowing those things in the same way as a child born into a family. For a child who spent a long time in an orphanage and experienced going hungry or not being responded to when they were sad or lonely, an important task is to learn their needs will be met by their parents. While they are learning this they may become increasingly clingy and distressed at any separation, before they begin to trust their needs will be met in an ongoing way. Children may need the reassurance of sleeping in the same room as their parents.

Rejecting the Parent

Learning to trust and attach to a parent can be a different journey for a child who has been ‘wired’ through their experiences to expect to be abandoned. They may feel very conflicted as they begin to feel affection and connection because it is a new experience, and respond by rejecting or pushing a parent away.

Extreme Tantrums

A child’s ability to process information, reason and be in control of themselves is much less than an adult. This is especially so for children who have had disrupted attachments and early traumatic experiences. They may display long and extreme tantrums as an outcome of overwhelming confusion, fear and grief.

Controlling Behaviours

Children who have not learned they can trust adults to be kind, safe and permanent have learned it is safest to be the one in control and it can take a long time for this to change. This may lead to the child resisting adults’ directions and being oppositional and defiant.
How can you help?

- Ask the parent about what they have learned and how best they would like you to support them in responding to behaviours in their child.
- Make meals for the family – cooking can be a challenge when there is a new child who needs constant care.
- Offer to clean – the new child may be very demanding and unable to manage playing alone or with other children. Offering to help with the cleaning means the new parent/s will have more emotional and physical energy to give to their new child.
- In the early days, help re-direct the child to their new parents for a cuddle or help, rather than giving this yourself. Do this very kindly so the child knows you are not rejecting them.

Additional suggestions:

- Do the shopping – shopping can be very difficult with new children who become overstimulated by the lights and crowds in shopping centres.
- Offer to refuel the car – children who are unsettled or not used to being in a car can be unsafe when the car is refuelling.
- Spend time with other children in the family – the new child will probably be needing a lot of time and energy from the new parent/s and other children in the family may be feeling left out.
- Learn about the impact of earlier loss and trauma in babies and young people. This will help you to support the parents and for you to be a safe space for them to share their challenges.
- Ask the parents how you can help.
- Be a listening ear and a shoulder for support.
What not to do

- Don’t judge when the parents appear to be struggling—parenting a little person who has experienced broken attachments and earlier trauma is not like ‘usual parenting’ and to feel overwhelmed is normal!

- Don’t judge the child’s behaviour – ask the parent about what they have learned and how best they would like you to support them in responding to behaviours in their child.

- Don’t try to ‘be the parent’ or ‘favourite person’ for the child in the early days. Support them in learning to connect with and trust their new parents first, rather than seeking affection from others.

- Respect the child’s and the family’s right to privacy. Although you may be tempted to spread the ‘good news’ story remember it is the child’s personal information and consider the appropriateness and possible long term impacts of anything you share.