



Special needs adoption from China: Exploring child-level indicators, adoptive family characteristics, and correlates of behavioral adjustment

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Abstract

Since 1994, China has been a leading source of international adoptions in the US, and since 2000, an increasing number of these children have entered the country under the special needs classification. While there is a large body of research on domestic special needs adoptions, very little is known about special needs adoptions from China. This study took advantage of a large survey of 1096 adopted Chinese children to explore a number of questions on special needs adoptions from China. The sample included 124 children adopted under the special needs classification. In addition to parental reports of child behavioral problems on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), data on age at adoption, type of special needs, pre-adoption adversity, developmental delays at adoption, and Initial Adaptation to Adoption were collected retrospectively from the adoptive parents. The analysis revealed no differences between special needs (SN) and non-special needs (NS) children on any of the measures. In addition, the nature of the disabilities associated with the SN classification for many of the children may not pose significant challenges to optimal development. Policy and practice implications are discussed in light of these findings.

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1. Introduction

Special needs adoption from China became officially available in September 2000, when China implemented laws to allow “older and disabled” children to be adopted internationally

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through the “waiting child” program (China Center for Adoption Affairs (CCAA)). Information on the special needs of these children is first gathered and compiled by the CCAA and then made available to authorized adoption agencies in foreign countries such as the United States (US). The adoption agencies are usually given about 3 months to find a potential adoptive family for children in the program. The CCAA mandates that families with biological children be open to accept children with special needs classification. Seven years into the launching of the “waiting child” program no statistics have been made available by the CCAA regarding either the specifics of special needs represented in the program or the total number of children adopted under the special needs classification.

In light of the fact that the language of China’s rather terse special needs adoption policy highlights disabilities as one of only two explicitly stated criteria for special needs classification (the other indicator being age), it is useful to begin with a definitional exploration of the term “special needs.” The term, in US nomenclature, has overlapping but slightly different meanings within the fields of *child welfare* and *developmental disabilities/special education*. In the latter field, the term has gained increased use as a generic descriptor for individuals with the broad range of disabilities covered by federal legislation on the provision of special education and other intervention services, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (PL 108-446, the most recent reauthorization of the 1975 landmark legislation, PL 94-142). In the child welfare field, particularly in the domestic adoption research literature, the term covers a much broader range of conditions deemed to have the potential to constitute a barrier to permanent adoption placement and/or affect the outcomes of adoption. It is crucially important, therefore, that “special needs” not be equated simplistically with the presence of disabilities.

Beyond mental or physical disabilities, behavioral problems, and emotional disorders, the term “special needs” in domestic adoptions within the child welfare field is frequently applied to the following categories of children: children who are relatively older¹; those who have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse or severe neglect; those who are members of sibling groups being placed within the same adoptive family; those from a minority cultural/ethnic group; those with histories of prenatal exposure to alcohol and other drugs or to HIV/AIDS; and those exposed to violence and substance abuse (Groza & Ryan, 2002; Leung & Erich, 2002; McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001; McGlone, Santos, Kazama, Fong, & Mueller, 2002; Reilly & Platz, 2003, 2004; Rycus, Hughes, & Goodman, 1998; Schweiger & O’Brien, 2005; Sullivan & Freundlich, 1999). Recent data compiled by the Child Welfare League of America (2006) on children adopted through public agencies showed the following distribution of 44,804 children in the various special needs categories (after excluding 6599 missing cases and 590 cases coded as “not applicable”): disabilities or medical conditions (27.8%); age (26.5%); sibling group member (22.4%); racial/ethnic background (10.5%); other (13.9%). Thus, in the 2004 US public adoptions data base, 72.2% of the special needs adoptions did not involve children with disabilities or medical conditions.

¹ The definition of “older” children varies significantly across American states. It ranges from 1 to 2 years in states such as Illinois and Indiana to 8/9 years in such states as Alabama, Alaska, and Connecticut. There are intriguing nuanced differentiations within these definitions. For example, in some states that define “older” as 8/9 years for white children, the corresponding cutoff for ethnic and racial minority children may be 2 (e.g., Alabama and Arkansas). Outlier states like Kansas define older as 12 years or more, if age is the only special need (see Child Welfare Information Gateway: http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adopt_assistance/questions.cfm?quest_id=1). The Child Welfare Information Gateway is a service of the Children’s Bureau of Administration for Children and Families (ACYF), US Department of Health and Human Services.

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