



Traveling to Your Child's Land of Birth What Age is the Best Age?

By

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Even as parents are making plans to adopt an internationally born child, most are already thinking about the day when they will return to their child's country of birth as a family. More and more, parents are realizing that a heritage journey is one of the most significant factors in the identity building process of internationally adoptive children.



With increasingly more preparation being done by adoption agencies who understand the importance of post adoption services, families are realizing that in time, their children will benefit from embracing their birth culture **first hand**. In putting together the pieces of their identity, it is important for kids to make a connection with their place of birth or founding, the orphanages where they lived, their caretakers and perhaps birth family.

But in how much time? What age is the “best” age for a homeland journey?

Realizing it or not, what parents are really saying is:

“I want my child to become a warm, wonderful, genuine person integrating all of who they are--at what point in their lives will a homeland journey help my child do that?”

And, what is it about a homeland journey that does that anyway?”

In my mind, those are the real questions.

The journey is about giving kids the experiences, the information and the tools they need to get comfortable with who they are. More than comfortable. The journey is about giving kids what they need to become self confident, emotionally healthy, productive people. Experiences that encourage a strong two-culture identity.

The Ties Program has long maintained that the single most important message children receive on a homeland journey is that the people with whom they share their heritage are warm, wonderful, genuine people. In receiving that message, kids are given a significant and meaningful piece of their identity. We have found that given opportunities, kids of any age take in the message, and use it throughout the rest of their lives.

Ian Hagan is proof positive that kids can “get it” from an early age.....

Many years ago, I was standing on a street corner in Seoul with Ian and his family...Mom, Dad and three “stair step” kids ages 7, 9 and 11. Ian was the youngest of the three Korean born children, and we were having chops made, Korean signature stamps. As adoptive families tend to do when traveling, we were drawing some attention. A crowd of Korean men took an interest in what was happening, and as they watched, they would talk, then laugh. It was the kind of laughter that made you feel comfortable; the kind of emotional warmth most adoptive families feel the world over.



We knew whatever was being said was coming from gentle hearts and kind souls. The scene continued—a circle of talking and laughing. Finally, one man who could hold back no longer, walked toward Ian, gently tussling Ian’s hair. As he made this magical gesture, we again heard the warm laugh. It was at that point that little Ian turned to me with a HUGE smile and said, “Mrs. Piper, aren’t Korean’s NEAT!!!”



Over the years, I have replayed that moment in my mind many times. It was almost as if you could feel the message float through the air. What a gift for a young child to reflect on as he integrates the life he was born into with the life he lives in his adoptive family. I know, some of you are saying, “But he won’t ever remember the details of the trip.” It may surprise you to hear I agree. Kids of any age (and even the adults) forget the details but remember the feelings the details created.

In **feeling** the messages, the imprint is deep, lasting and useful in the “work of identity building.”

Kids on a homeland journey are “imprinted with positive messages” by interacting with people in their birth country. One young Vietnamese adoptee recently relayed this story to me. *“I never felt pretty before I went to Vietnam. But then, I was in a shop, and a Vietnamese woman came up to me and said, ‘Oh what a beautiful girl you are.’ It felt so amazing to have someone who was really Vietnamese think I was pretty.”*



It was a fleeting moment with a profound impact. A homeland journey is full of such moments. The experiences become even more profound as we visit places of birth or founding, the orphanages where the children lived, meet caretakers and sometimes birth family. On Ties Program evaluations, nearly all kids say these visits were the most meaningful part of their journey. Children of all ages secure those moments into their hearts and souls to be used in the life long work of identity.



But the journey's significance is deeper yet because it allows kids to grieve the losses of adoption, heal and move forward. No parent ever wants to see their child hurting, but if they are hurt, we would all like to see them heal. A homeland journey allows for healing by giving kids a chance to grieve in the ways kids grieve, which is almost always a different experience than what parents expect.

Most kids do not go through the trip overflowing with tears. In fact, on a typical Ties trip, kids (and parents) are singing on the bus, laughing hysterically, and enjoying the sense of “being” in their birth country with other kids who share a similar history.

When grief comes in the outward and “traditional sense” it comes in waves and bursts. But for most kids, it comes in ways that go pretty much unnoticed by all around them. It comes in linking—the finding and holding on to points of connection.

When our 15 year old son Michael died of leukemia, I couldn't help but draw parallels to the depth of loss adoptees feel at a core level. Grief stricken myself in the very “adult stereotypical way” I was very aware that our teenage son Joe was reacting very differently. Distraught with loss, he “linked” to his brother in ways that brought him comfort and healing. He wore his brother's favorite sweatshirt every day, took to sitting in his brother's chair, and even tried out for and got a part in the high school musical...something Joe would never had done, but Michael would surely have been a part of. Through these connections, these “links”, Joe is working through his loss, something we all need to do for our souls to be mended.



That's what kids do with adoption related grief and loss, and we see it time and time again as we travel.

Just a few days ago, I was once again reminded of Amy Anselmino. Now a young adult, she was standing in our office, retelling her story of grief and connection...something that happened when she was just nine years old traveling with The Ties Program.

Amy and her family were visiting the clinic where Amy had been born. They were scheduled to meet the doctor who delivered her. After their visit, Amy's Mom came to my hotel room, crying. She said the visit had been awful. *"Amy couldn't have cared less. While we were in the waiting room, she was all over the place, first sitting in one chair, then another. She really didn't care about being there."*

We hugged and talked about visits not always being what we dreamed about. Mom left and I was sad.

About 30 minutes later, there was a knock on my door again. It was Mom. Through her tears, she said, *"Amy just told us she sat in every chair in the waiting room so that she would be sure to sit in the chair where her birth mom must have sat."* **Linking. At nine years old.**



In Peru, three young adoptees found plastic bags and as we traveled, collected what appeared to be insignificant "stuff." But when asked what they were doing with that "stuff" they replied, "Stuff? These are pieces of our ancestors!" **Linking.**

After her trip to China, Libby came home and returned to her life and friends. At a casual glance, her China trip is a past moment. But look carefully into Libby's room, and you will see a picture from the trip, or a gift she was given in China (perhaps by an orphanage caregiver or foster mom), or a souvenir she purchased along the way. Try and move those treasures, those precious links that continually allow her to connect, and you will find how deep the emotion goes.

So, when you ask, "What age is the best age?" and hope for a chronological answer, perhaps the best answer comes in the form of questions.

- At what age would I like my child to know that the people with whom she shares her heritage are warm, wonderful, genuine people?
- At what age would I like him to create links that will help him heal?
- At what age would I like to give my child the experiences and tools she needs to form a healthy identity, integrating the culture she was born into and the culture she lives in?

There is no question that as children become older, most kids can cognitively process the experiences in a more adult way. But they can feel the messages at **all** ages.

The important "stuff" of a homeland journey doesn't come with a magical chronological age, but rather with experiences taken in by an open heart.

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