

# Emerge



## A Child's Place

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Occupational Therapy  
Speech Therapy

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## Addressing New Challenges in International Adoption



Bonnie Hacker, OT  
Founder / Director

Among children adopted internationally, the prevalence of difficulties with speech, language, social behavior, motor skills and health seems to be rising dramatically.<sup>1-3</sup> For instance, 32.5% of parents surveyed reported that their adopted children either have received or should receive special services for learning and/or behavioral problems. Forty-one percent reported that their children are receiving speech/language services. Twenty-eight to 29% of international adoptees in grades 6-12 are falling behind in some or all school subjects.<sup>4</sup>



Experts attribute this increase in difficulties to the changing nature of international adoption.<sup>5</sup> Before the 1990's, international adoptions tended to come from individual families and at very young ages for the adoptees. Since then, Americans have been adopting more children who are 12 months old or older and a much larger percentage of those children have lived in institutions such as orphanages or baby homes.<sup>6</sup> The State of the Children Report from 2002 to 2005 showed that 73% of today's international adoptees spent some time in an institutional setting. Foreign orphanages, baby homes, and other institutions may lack adequate resources to provide needed human interaction, freedom of movement, and health care for children.<sup>2,3,7</sup> One study found that 14% of children from foreign institutions had global development delays.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the difficulties highlighted below are not unique to children born and cared for internationally. These difficulties can stem from other experiences and can occur in American born children who have not experienced institutional care. When you see these characteristics in a child, consider a referral to **Emerge - A Child's Place** for expert occupational and speech therapy assessments and treatment.

- **Verbal Skills and Preverbal Skills:** Infants and very young children begin learning pre-verbal skills by watching parents speak to them. Institutional settings with poor caretaker to children ratios (greater than 1 to 7) often deprive children of this interaction. **Preverbal skills have proven predictive of an adoptee's success at learning English.**<sup>4,8</sup> Because of differences in health care, hearing problems and other physiological health problems are more frequent abroad. These health problems can delay or stunt a child's speech and language development. An expert, pediatric speech therapy assessment at Emerge can help isolate a child's individual difficulties and differentiate physiological problems from learning challenges. Subsequent therapy, if needed, helps children acquire functional communication skills and ultimately ensures a positive school experience.
- **Non-Verbal Communication Skills:** The relative isolation experienced in foreign institutional settings seems to delay other skills of communication. Studies suggest that these children are less likely to **point** or use **other non-verbal communication** to attain toys or items of interest. They are less likely to **follow another person's gaze** to see what that person is seeing.<sup>9</sup> **The child's ability to initiate communicative interactions and share experiences with others has been shown predictive of the rate at which international adoptees learn English.** Dr. Maria Kropunia of the Institute of Child Development writes that "these findings suggest the need for **early** verbal and cognitive assessment, particularly for children adopted over 12 months of age."<sup>10</sup>
- **Social & Behavioral Difficulties:** Employee turnover in institutional settings or the general lack of human interaction can result in **attachment deficit disorder** wherein the child has difficulty bonding with caregivers.<sup>3</sup> These bonds are important in helping the child feel safe. Children from international institutions may also be delayed in social behaviors such as responding normally to environmental stimuli, taking turns, understanding the perspective of others, playing with toys, and cooperation.<sup>11</sup> At Emerge, therapists address social skills through paired treatment sessions or programs such as their summer *Preschool Power Program*.

Here, we have focused on communication and social challenges faced by international adoptees. Other research and reports from concerned parents points to difficulties with motor skills, sensory processing, and short term memory.<sup>12</sup> Watch for future bulletins where we will address these challenges and the solutions available through occupational therapy.

Please tell parents about  
**Emerge - A Child's Place**  
Believing in a Child's Potential to Flourish

## References

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