

ON THE HORIZON

The latest news & information from Wide Horizons For Children

In Celebration of Birth Culture

March 2008

Hola! Ni Hao! Privet! Selam! Namaskar!
AnYungHaSeYo!Hello!

As many of you know, spring and fall are culture camp seasons at Wide Horizons. We now offer four camps; Eastern European, Latin American, China, and Korean. Culture camps are one of several ways to help your foreign-born child gain a sense of connection to the country he/she was born into. As an American, your child will become "as American as apple pie," but will also forever carry an identity associated with being born in Korea, China, Russia, etc.. Think about how many times in your life you have been asked in person or writing, "where were you born?"

This edition of "On the Horizon" is dedicated to celebrating the importance of birth culture. Read on to get some ideas about introducing your child to his/her birth culture and learn how some families have made the connection with their children.

Happy Spring!

The WHFC PASE (Post Adopt Support and Education)
Team



KEEPING THE CONNECTION: Homeland Tours

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

By Becca Piper, Founder/Director

The Ties Program — Adoptive Family Homeland Tours

Even as parents are making plans to adopt an internationally born child, most are already thinking

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 of 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 H 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, Dan, 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, 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 little Ian turned to me with a HUGE smile and said, "Mrs. Piper, aren't Koreans 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 with 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 that 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 a few months ago, 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's musical... something Joe would never have 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 A. 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 and 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 had 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 we 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 director 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 out 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 have to come with a magical chronological age, but rather with experiences taken in by an open heart.

[The Ties Program](#) is the oldest and most comprehensive adoptive family homeland journey organization in the United States. The adoptees who travel with The Ties Program are sometimes as young as four or five, and sometimes are adult adoptees. The majority of kids are pre-teens and full teens.

Things to Consider When Deciding on a Homeland Tour

By Pat Hoopes, MSW, LICSW, Clinical Director, Wide Horizons For Children, Inc.

Homeland tours are becoming increasingly popular in the adoption community. Parents are opting for these trips as a way to help connect their family, and their adopted children in particular, with their children's country of birth.

Homeland tours differ. Some focus solely on cultural experience while others are adoption focused as well. The former is essentially a tour like any that a non-adopted person might choose to take and may include the following:

- Visiting historical sites such as temples, churches, and seats of government.
- Dining in restaurants that offer authentic dining experiences and regional cooking.
- Visiting museums of art, crafts, and historical artifacts.
- Travel to small towns and large cities of historical significance and notable beauty.

These trips are carefully orchestrated to provide the traveler with the opportunity to see, smell, taste, and hear all that makes the country unique and wonderful. This trip will provide the adopted person with an opportunity to experience the culture of his/her country of birth while in the midst of people who look similar to him/her.

Some families are looking for a tour which offers all that plus an experience that is uniquely relevant to their child's birth. The tour described earlier responds to the question, "who are they?" (Koreans, Colombians, etc) while the adoption focused tour responds to the additional question, "who am I?"

An "adoption focused" homeland tour provides opportunities for obtaining child specific adoption information by offering some of the following:

- Arranging adoption file reviews with the child's orphanage or the child welfare institution that placed the child. File reviews may reveal information that is new or different from what was given at the time of referral.
- Arranging meetings with foster families. It is surprising to see that foster families really remember the children they cared for so long ago!
- Visiting orphanages. These may or may not be the child's actual orphanage. Families are often able to engage the children in the orphanage by holding them and playing with them.
- Visiting a Maternity Home where expectant women are deciding whether adoption placement might be the right choice for their child.
- Meetings with birth family. This may be a birth parent, sibling, or other relative.
- Visiting places of birth such as the town or village where the child was born or even the hospital if it still exists.

How much information each child will obtain varies a great deal, but the experience is very personal none the less.

When deciding which tour option is best for your family, you might consider the following:

- Most importantly, what do you want your family/child to get from this experience? Is it a general "feel" for the country, a positive and uncomplicated experience? Or, a more personal experience that may answer some questions that your child has about his/her adoption?
- Do you envision this as a first of subsequent trips to this country or is this a "once in a lifetime" event?
- Which type of trip may be most age appropriate for your youngster? Is your child mature enough to cope with what may be difficult or disappointing information? Is your child one who may benefit from "knowing" in spite of how difficult the information may be?

When choosing a tour organization, consider the following:

- How long has this tour organization been in operation? How often have they led groups to your child's country of birth?

- Who escorts the group? What is their experience/background? Are any escorts adoption professionals (essential if the tour is adoption focused)?
- How large/small is the group?
- How much time is actual touring? Is there enough "down time?"
- If adoption focused, what do they provide for emotional support?
- What do they offer for orientation and preparation?
- Ask for references of families who have traveled with them to your child's country of birth.
- What can you expect your total costs to be?

Taking your family on a homeland tour is a gift of love, understanding, and celebration. Go if you can! A listing of organizations offering Homeland Tours is available in our [Post Adoption](#) section.

Learn more about staying connected with your child's birth culture

Read articles and stories from our staff and families.

SPEAKING UP! An Interview With Madalina and Alex Zimmerman

Madalina, age 14, and Alex, age 12, from Wauwatosa, WI, traveled with their family as part of the Romanian TIES program in 2007.

The Importance of Connection and Roots in Identity Development

At some point in their life, international adoptees who join families of a different race often describe experiencing a feeling of confusion about who they are and how they fit in the world.

A Homeland Tour to Russia

It has been 14 years since Russia opened its doors to international adoption. Many of the pioneer families who adopted in the first five years of the program are now thinking about a return trip with their children.

China Ties Program: A Homeland Tour

Do younger children benefit from a homeland tour? Can they tolerate two weeks of travel? How will they feel about visiting their orphanages?

Keeping the Connection

Family reunions are a summer tradition -- time to catch up on the past year's events, see how the children have grown, share memories, laugh, eat, and play.

MOVIE REVIEW: Juno

Reviewed by Deb Shrier, MSW, LICSW

There has been quite a bit of talking about the movie, *Juno*, a story that portrays a 16-year-old high school student who is pregnant and unable to parent. The main character - Juno - is a spunky, bright, and interesting adolescent. She is connected to her family and has several close friends who support her during her pregnancy. The absence of a social worker in the film does leave this movie feeling a little "lighter" than one would have expected. What was missing was Juno's exploration about the relinquishment of her child and the impact this decision would have on her life.

For adopted teens, whether adopted domestically or internationally, this movie can clearly bring up a number of thoughts and feelings about their own adoption experience. With that in mind, should an adopted teen see this film? Sure, but it is important for an adoptive parent to check in afterwards about what their child thought of the movie. For adoptive parents, it might also trigger some reaction about their own experience in the adoption of their child as well as thoughts/feelings regarding birth family. For birth parents, *Juno* may also bring them back to a time when they faced the decision of relinquishment.

While there are aspects of adoption that were clearly missing, overall *Juno* portrays adoption and birthparents in a more positive light than what typically is seen on television or in movies.

Recent Family Get-Togethers

View pictures and read details of some recent cultural and family events. Select an individual event below or view the [complete archive](#) on our website.



[China Culture Camp](#)
Spring 2008



[Eastern European Culture Camp](#)
Fall 2007



[Latin American Culture Camp](#)
Fall 2007



[Parade of Nations](#)
Fall 2007



[Ethiopia Family Reception](#)
Summer 2007



[Philippines Family Reception](#)
Fall 2007

HOST A CHILD FROM COLOMBIA THIS SUMMER

Wide Horizons For Children partners with Kidsave, a summer host program for families in NH & MA. The five-week program, Summer Miracles, offers older children living in Colombian orphanages the opportunity to experience life in an American family, and have a memorable and fun summer vacation. While families are not obligated to subsequently adopt the child they host, Kidsave reports that 75-90% of families who host through the Summer Miracles program do move on to adoption.

Kidsave needs families in NH and MA who are willing to host a child. Read our [frequently asked questions](#) for more information about this program.

HUMANITARIAN AID

This year, Wide Horizons has brought hope and assistance to thousands of orphaned, abandoned and at-risk children around the world. Add your support to our programs and learn more about our work:

[Contribute to our projects](#)

WHFC has funded a number of projects around the world that provide children with the basic necessities to which they are entitled — food, clothing, housing, education, and medical care.

[Sponsor a child](#)

Our child sponsorship programs in Ethiopia, Guatemala, India and the Philippines provide children with their basic needs and the tools they need in hope of breaking the cycle of poverty.

[Support subsidies](#)

A permanent, loving family is the thing every child needs most. Subsidies can help ease the cost of adoption for a family who would otherwise be able to provide a loving home to a child.

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