

"Their Past": Photos, Video, Audiotape and More...

By Arleta James, PCC

All I have to do is turn on my computer and shortly a box pops up asking me what year I graduated so that I can be connected with high school classmates. Of course, there is also the popularity of [facebook](#) where millions are connecting to those they knew in their earlier years. I, like many of you, enjoy seeing the faces of people I used to know from high school, college, work places, etc. I spend time scrolling through their photos and become filled with happy feelings.



Yet, it never ceases to amaze me how few photos many children have of their life prior to their adoption. Despite the fact that the creation and maintenance of a life book for each child who enters foster care has been considered a "best practice" standard in North American social work for many years, only a minority of children have photos of their birth parents and siblings, themselves, and previous foster families, schools and neighborhoods. Even smaller numbers of children adopted from outside North America have such photos. It is very difficult to put your life together when you have so little information. The analogy we often use in therapy is that these children are like a 500 piece puzzle missing 400 of the pieces. Photos are an integral part of healing the traumatized child. Photos help children make what sense is possible of their life prior to adoption.

Domestic Adoption

Throughout my years in adoption, I have helped many families go back and obtain pictures. However, once the adoption is complete the task becomes complicated—foster families have moved, are no longer with the agency, or have become ill or died. Professionals take different jobs or retire, siblings have moved and so on. Additionally, once an adoption is finalized, many states' laws require sealing the child's earlier child welfare file. This means that the contents cannot be accessed without a court order. Let me urge you to ask for photos and materials such as report cards and school awards during the pre-placement process.

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Make it a priority to obtain as many photos as you can. If the foster family has any video, gather that up as well. Copies are easy to make if the foster family does not want to part with their originals. Photograph the foster family's home, community, school, classmates, etc.

If you are the professional handling the reunification effort that occurs right after the child enters foster care, take photos as birth family members visit the child. Place them in the child's file or on an inexpensive flash drive. If the child returns to their birth parents, the photos can be given to the birth family. If the child moves on to adoption, the child has those valuable pictures of his birth mother, birth father, and so on.



If the child was in more than one foster home, gathering photos can be initiated pre-placement and then completed post-placement. Work with the social worker to identify these families, pressing if you must. The custodial agency has a record of where the children were in placement. Celeste's story provides a good example of how to go about this.

In helping Celeste piece together her life, we knew that she had been in eight previous homes. We had the starting dates and ending dates of each placement. Although Celeste remembered some of the families' names, she did not know their addresses. Her adoptive mother and I composed a letter to each of the families on our office stationery. We explained who we were and when Celeste had resided in their home. We explained that we were seeking photos or any other information they would be willing to share. We enclosed a return envelope addressed to our office with each of the letters. The worker who had handled Celeste's adoption kindly completed the mailing as all she had to do was address the envelopes. Several of the families responded. Celeste was thrilled to see pictures of herself and her previous caregivers! One foster mother took the time to write a letter about her family and their time with Celeste. She closed the letter by telling her how happy she was that she had been adopted. This was the first time that Celeste felt as if any of her previous families had cared about her!

International Adoption

I have had the opportunity to review a lot of photos and video taken on trips to the child's homeland. Interestingly, there are often abundant photos of the main tourist attractions as well as the McDonald's! Actually, in one case, the family had so many pictures of the McDonald's that I actually commented on it. The parents' response was, "It gave us comfort to see something familiar so far away from home." Yet, when it comes to actual photos of the child's orphanage, orphanage mates, orphanage caregivers, the child's birth town and so on, the number of these photos is frequently few.

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Photos and video of the child's actual living quarters, caregivers and friends are important! The child needs to know where he came from and who was there. Photos of Red Square and St. Basil Cathedral, The Great Wall and Forbidden City, or a Mayan temple are nice, but they are not accurate representations of the child's experience in his homeland. The child needs as many (or more) photos of the orphanage as he does the well-known places of his country of origin.

There are cases in which the family is unable to tour the orphanage. In these cases, take photos of what is available—the outside of the orphanage, the grounds, the room in which you spend time with the child, the other children, the staff, the director, your interpreter and so on. Take ample pictures! As children mature, they will want to know where they lived, who took care of them and who helped you adopt them. If you are close to the child's birth home town, make the drive! The child's birth parents are not going to recognize you. If you remain worried that they will identify the child, one parent can make the trip while the other cares for the child in the city where you are staying. Take photos of yourselves and your family at the orphanage. If you are not in the photos, young children often have difficulty connecting to the fact that you were actually at the orphanage. Children forget names over time. This often causes sad feelings. Gather the names of the children and adults you are photographing. This is especially important if the child had a special connection to a particular caregiver or an orphanage mate. Photograph the airports, the people who meet you at the airport, your hotel or apartment—take ample photos of each aspect of the trip!



If your child is a toddler or older, frame some of the photos and display them in her bedroom after you get home. Just as familiar sites will be comforting to you while abroad, photos of familiar people will be comforting to your child as she adjusts to her new home.

Video is wonderful as well, and it records the sounds. I know that this should go without saying, but since I have seen as much video of orphanage caregivers' feet as I have seen photos of McDonald's, ensure that you are aiming the camera appropriately. If the excitement of meeting the new child and simultaneously videotaping the event are too much, then see if someone else is available who can carry out this task. Make it a priority to keep the video and photos safe during the trip and after arriving home. I have heard many sad stories about what happened to these precious keepsakes.

Video serves another purpose. Video footage can help your adoption medical professionals assess the child's motor skills, obvious medical/congenital problems, severe malnutrition and other risk factors. The

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University of Minnesota, International Adoption Medicine Program's website offers the article, [How to Make a Good Video](#).

Audio taping is another consideration. One family recorded an orphanage caregiver singing a lullaby to their son while they were at the orphanage. This, combined with about thirty minutes of the normal sounds of the orphanage, allowed this child to fall asleep more easily in his new home.

In conclusion, quickly photograph the "new" family. The visual depiction of the change that has occurred in the family helps everyone begin to adjust.



Oh, just in case I did not say it enough times, here it is again—take ample photos!

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