

International adoption

Kids find homes but search for an identity

Taking a risk: More families adopting

By Elizabeth Neff

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Kathleen Kaiser, who opened Salt Lake City-based Wasatch... (Paul Fraughton/The Salt Lake Tribune)



Top left: Kathleen Kaiser, who opened Wasatch Adoptions after her daughter and sister adopted from Romania in 1991, shares stories with her adopted grandson.



Bottom Left: Bowen England, 2, was adopted from Guatemala as an infant and lives in Sandy with his five older siblings. Maggie, 9; Macy, 14; McKenna, 16; Sophie, 6; and Davis, 12. The number of Americans adopting abroad has increased dramatically in recent years.



Bottom Right: Bowen England who was adopted from Guatemala plays with neighbor Libby Mei Henrie, who was adopted from China

With his mahogany skin, dark hair and deep brown eyes, 2-year-old Bowen England stands out as he plays with his blond, blue-eyed siblings.

His parents, Corey and Carrie England of Sandy, added to their family through international adoption. They brought Bowen home from Guatemala as an infant to join five siblings, ages 6 to 16.

"We thought we were done [having children]," Carrie England said. "We ended up just realizing and feeling like we have the room, the means, the ability to do this and space in our heart for another child. We wanted to adopt internationally because . . . it was giving a child a better life."

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and wife Mary Kaye cited similar

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- [Rankings of the most popular countries for international adoptions, 1990 to 2006.](#)

reasons last year when they adopted daughter Asha from India, adding her to a family that already included daughter Gracie Mei, adopted from China in 1999.

Their actions are not unique; the number of Americans adopting abroad has increased dramatically in recent years. Nationwide, international adoptions more than doubled from nearly 9,000 in 1995 to nearly 23,000 in 2005, according to the U.S. Department of State. In Utah, the numbers more than tripled from 55 in 1996 to 180 in 2005.

The Englands' neighborhood includes families that have adopted from China and soon, Ethiopia. Statistics from 2005 show most Utahns adopted from China, followed by Russia, Kazakhstan and Guatemala.

World events, the efficiency of foreign bureaucracies and domestic adoption agencies, and social and humanitarian ideals guide trends in international adoption, researchers and historians say.

Such factors change constantly, making international adoption problematic for some. One need only ask parents who adopted children through Focus on Children to know complications can arise. The Utah-based agency faces a 135-count federal indictment for allegedly operating a fraudulent adoption scheme in Samoa.

Even parents who adopt abroad with few glitches must learn to address challenges their children may face as part of a different culture.

"It has to be a very spiritual, driven, inward conviction that that is what you are supposed to do," Carrie England said of her family's choice to adopt. "Otherwise you would never make it through the process . . . it's so long and so emotional and so daunting."

From the beginning

The organized movement of children across international borders for the purpose of adoption is a post-World War II phenomenon, according to Ellen Herman,

Worldwide adoption

Wasatch International Adoptions works only with those countries that have a proven track record. The agency is currently working with only five countries:

Country	Cost (in thousands)	Wait
China	\$18-\$20	20 months
Guatemala	\$28-\$30	12 months
Haiti	\$17-\$18	12-24 months
Kazakhstan	\$26	12 months
Vietnam	\$24-\$25	Time not set*

** New program, only five parents have been accepted*

Source: Wasatch International Adoptions
The Salt Lake Tribune

a University of Oregon professor writing a book about adoption.

Wars, famine and returning soldiers placed the plight of orphans abroad - many of them Asian - into the American consciousness, she said.

Organizations devoted to international adoptions, many of them religiously affiliated, sprung up during this time but were largely unregulated. Adoptions were handled through temporary federal refugee acts or proxy adoptions, in which a designated proxy adopted on behalf of a family in a foreign court, Herman said.

It wasn't until Congress enacted the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1961 that processes for international adoption were permanently written into U.S. law, said Herman. Under the act, the State Department gained oversight for the issuance of immigrant orphan visas.

The U.S. in 1994 became part of what might be the largest modern-day effort to regulate the international adoption industry - the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption. It aims to prevent child trafficking by requiring adoption agencies in member countries to have special accreditations, or be working toward them, to handle adoptions with other member countries.

As of January, 70 countries had joined the convention and more than half of the international adoptions by U.S. parents in 2005 were from convention countries.

Implementation of its standards is definitely having an impact.

Adoptions from Guatemala are expected to shut down when the standards take effect in the U.S. later this year. Guatemala joined the convention but has determined doing so violated its constitution. A State Department advisory in March detailing concerns with some notaries in the country may have already started to curb the Guatemalan adoption trend.

Implementation of the convention means adopting from many countries is simply taking longer - even in the popular China, which used to take about a year to 14 months but now takes more like 24 months, said Kathleen Kaiser, executive director of Salt Lake City-based Wasatch International Adoptions.

"When these countries have tried to implement the policies and regulations outlined in the treaty, it's been a difficult thing."

'Getting them out'

Despite longer waits in some countries, the popularity of adopting internationally doesn't appear to be diminishing.

Wasatch International, the agency many Utah families use, as of January had about 120 open cases. It has placed about 1,200 kids since it opened 11 years ago, and recently expanded to provide a program for those who want to adopt special-needs children from China.

Kaiser opened Wasatch International in the years after her daughter and sister adopted from Romania in 1991.

"We became very aware of the plight of children living in orphanages in Eastern Europe," she said. "We began working as a family to provide humanitarian aid, but became discouraged. At some point we wanted to just get them out of there."

She describes Wasatch International as a "pretty conservative" agency that focuses on countries with programs that have predictability and shorter wait times for parents.

At Wasatch, the adoption process starts with an initial application fee and informational session. When a country is chosen, parents must pass a home study. Then a long paperwork process begins, depending on the country.

In countries such as Kazakhstan, parents can travel to actually choose their child. In others such as China, they are assigned a child. Fees are paid in increments to the agency, with half usually collected in the first six months and the rest at the end of the adoption.

Kaiser calls her work a passion.

"I can't imagine not doing this every day," said Kaiser. "To me, it's a life calling."

Yet along the way she readily admits to hard lessons learned. The agency used to place older children, age 6 to 10, but no longer recommends it. After implementing follow-up surveys of clients years after they adopted

older children, Kaiser discovered many were problematic. Many older children had suffered deprivation, abuse and inadequate schooling in orphanages that affected them deeply.

"Most of them [parents] . . . said they would not have adopted an older child knowing what they knew then," Kaiser said.

Narrative burden

Parents considering international adoption must be aware of challenges their children will face, said Sarah Ballard of Colorado-based Innovative Counseling Services, which works with adoptees.

Adoptive children bear what she calls a "narrative burden." Because their physical appearance is different from that of other family members, everyone wants to know their story.

"From the time our adoptive kiddos come, we are stopped in the grocery line and they are singled out," Ballard said. "A lot of times that is a beautiful thing we are proud of, but it also singles us out as different . . . you can never be just anonymous. That narrative burden is something parents need to be prepared to help their kids with."

Ballard teaches kids how to tell their story when they want to, and to say no when they don't want to. Her own daughter, who looks more like Ballard's Vietnamese husband, once told her it made her sad that their skin didn't match.

"There is a naivety to think that we can love them with everything they are and that's going to be enough for them to feel like they belong," Ballard said.

Ballard tells her daughter their hearts match and points out other things they share, such as mannerisms.

Adoptees may love and be thankful for their parents, but the loss of a biological family must be acknowledged, too, she said.

A generation ago, the adoptive parents focused on integrating children into the family by ignoring differences. Now "people adopting internationally are pushing kids to learn the language of the birth culture, to bring that culture in their families . . . but they're American kiddos, and they don't see themselves as living in that culture."

Ballard's advice: "Be prepared to help them deal with the differences, but to let the kids take the lead," she said. "Whose needs are you trying to meet? If it's your need as a parent to make sure they are connected to something, that's really poor motivation. If you are trying to offer them opportunities, that's great."

'Totally Americanized'

At age 2, Bowen England hasn't yet noticed he looks different from other family members - he's focused on learning as much as he can from doting older brothers and sisters.

"I felt that it [the adoption process] was all up and up and it was going through the right channels," said Carrie England. "He was so little; he'll be totally Americanized. But it's important for us to have him know his culture."

She described the adoption of Bowen and other children in the neighborhood as an awakening of sorts.

"It's a miracle to know what their destinies are, and what they could have been," said Carrie England.

"Everything they do, we realize it's something that they couldn't have had."

In the end, the Englands say their experience, however rewarding, required conviction that they were doing the right thing.

"Every step of the way is anxiety-ridden, because even though the process went smoothly for me, a lot of it is out of your hands," she said.

No matter the process or outcomes related to international adoption, it's clear the notion has become widely accepted.

"We are fond of thinking of individual choice and preferences," Herman said. "The act of voluntary family formation [that] Americans are very fond of is so highlighted in adoption."

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Adoption tips for parents

Suggestions for parents considering international adoption. Choose an agency carefully.

Check with the state's licensing division and Better Business Bureau for complaints. Ask for multiple references from the agency and follow up on them. Check whether the agency has a physical office location, and visit.

Note an agency's response time to your phone call or e-mail. If it isn't responsive before you give it money, it likely will be less responsive afterward.

Be wary of too-good-to-be-true answers. If an agency's answers to your questions appear to be contradictory, vague, or unrealistic, be wary.

Approach from a business perspective. Never pay an agency thousands of dollars up front, and be wary of those who promise to accommodate you no matter what.

Know the norms of the birth country. A certain amount of flexibility is required for some birth countries more than others when it comes to meeting requests for a particular age and sex child.

Have the child examined. A physician can examine the child before the adoption is completed to provide parents with information about any physical or mental difficulties.

Source: Wasatch International Adoptions and the U.S. State Department

Coming Monday

- * Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and wife Mary Kaye talk candidly about life with daughters Asha and Gracie Mei.
- * How parents of international adoptees support one another.

Birth countries of Utah international adoptees

Utahns are adopting internationally at an increasing rate. The numbers below reflect international adoptions by country for Utahns between 1996 and 2005.



China, 325 People's Republic	Russia, 294	Kazakhstan, 109	Guatemala, 95
1996: 10	1996: 13	1996: 0	1996: 1
1997: 27	1997: 41	1997: 0	1997: 4
1998: 20	1998: 25	1998: 0	1998: 11
1999: 18	1999: 29	1999: 10	1999: 4
2000: 33	2000: 34	2000: 18	2000: 10
2001: 35	2001: 46	2001: 21	2001: 8
2002: 32	2002: 29	2002: 24	2002: 12
2003: 51	2003: 33	2003: 21	2003: 13
2004: 49	2004: 25	2004: 4	2004: 16
2005: 50	2005: 19	2005: 11	2005: 16

Haiti, 67	Ukraine, 65	Ethiopia, 60	India, 50
1996: 1	1996: 1	1996: 1	1996: 7
1997: 0	1997: 0	1997: 5	1997: 3
1998: 0	1998: 0	1998: 7	1998: 7
1999: 1	1999: 3	1999: 1	1999: 6
2000: 1	2000: 4	2000: 1	2000: 6
2001: 6	2001: 14	2001: 1	2001: 3
2002: 9	2002: 14	2002: 4	2002: 5
2003: 17	2003: 10	2003: 11	2003: 3
2004: 16	2004: 8	2004: 22	2004: 5
2005: 16	2005: 11	2005: 7	2005: 5

Korea, 40	Taiwan, 34	Romania, 29	Vietnam, 28
1996: 1	1996: 0	1996: 1	1996: 0
1997: 6	1997: 1	1997: 11	1997: 3
1998: 1	1998: 0	1998: 3	1998: 4
1999: 6	1999: 0	1999: 4	1999: 9
2000: 4	2000: 1	2000: 3	2000: 5
2001: 4	2001: 0	2001: 3	2001: 4
2002: 1	2002: 0	2002: 0	2002: 3
2003: 6	2003: 10	2003: 4	2003: 0
2004: 4	2004: 8	2004: 0	2004: 0
2005: 7	2005: 14	2005: 0	2005: 0

Note: Source countries providing less than 10 children not included on this list.
 Source: Fiscal year figures from the U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics
 REBONDA HAIKES MAYLETT/The Salt Lake Tribune