

Vietnamese Orphans -

By Joan Chatfield-Taylor

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While the moral and political questions of whether Vietnamese orphans should have been brought to this country are being debated in the courts and the press, several thousand American families are dealing with the children themselves.

By now, most of the adoptive parents have come down from the initial excitement that surrounded the arrival of the children and are dealing with the realities of intercultural, interracial adoption.

According to adoption experts and experienced parents, certain problems can be predicted.

The first big adjustment is the child's arrival at his new home.

Most of the Vietnamese children had physical problems that demanded immediate attention, including chicken pox, diarrhea, bronchitis, pneumonia, malnutrition and allergy to cow's milk. One couple learned that their child has had polio and they still don't know whether he will walk or not.

A trip to the dentist is an early priority.

Jackie Fitch, a Peninsula woman who adopted a 6-year-old Vietnamese boy, said, "His teeth were really in bad shape. I thought they were completely rotten, but it turned out that all the black was from nicotine and chewing betel nuts. We really had a problem with his smoking for a while."

The emotional and mental problems are more difficult to deal with, particularly if the child is no longer an infant and has vivid memories of his past.

The child with memo-

-Predictions

ries who has culture shock is not in a psychological state to make immediate family relationships. Older children need a period of being comforted, to catch their psychological breath," said Dr. Viola Bernard, a New York psychoanalyst who is a consultant to several adoption agencies.

Emotional insecurity seems to account for the

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sleeping problems many have when they first arrive.

Raymond Leber, assistant chief of California's adoption services, described children who slept in the doorway of their new parents' bedroom, apparently to prevent them from leaving.

One 3-year-old Vietnamese girl was literally terrified of going to bed for the first six weeks.

"It was as if she wasn't sure what changes might take place while she was asleep," her mother said.

Older children also have to deal with the language barrier, since few American adoptive parents know Vietnamese other than a

few basic phrases they've learned to deal with eating, sleeping and going to the bathroom.

"The language problem is the biggest problem. It's not being able to understand what people are doing to you and not being able to get across what you

are thinking," said David Kim, a Korean-American who works for the Holt adoption agency in Eugene, Ore.

Parents say that the children often react by simply refusing to speak Vietnamese at all.

"We took our little girl to a Vietnamese woman we know, and she refused to say a word in Vietnamese. They seem to want to forget the language, they want to become a part of what is," said Christine Broderick, a Saratoga mother who has adopted three Vietnamese children.

According to Kim, the children may forget their original language but often want to relearn it later when they realize the advantage of knowing two languages.

Adoption agencies encourage parents to make the child aware of his Vietnamese heritage.

For one couple, that meant big, cheerful posters and pictures of Oriental

children in their new son's bedroom. They are also keeping huge scrapbooks on the end of the Vietnam War and the orphan airlift that brought him to San Francisco.

Other parents are learning Vietnamese cooking, going to Oriental restaurants, visiting Oriental art galleries and buying picture books and maps to give their child a visual sense of where he came from.

Dr. Bernard encourages parents to keep their child's Vietnamese first name.

The next difficult period may come when the Vietnamese child goes to school for the first time.

"He has to learn the expectations of American schools," David Kim explained.

"Also, American families want to push them, to have them keep up with the kid next door. But youngsters must first get to know their mother and father and feel very secure at home before they go to school.

"If he's a year behind — so what? He'll learn faster if his parents wait until he's fully secure."

School is often the child's first contact with racism, perhaps in the

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form of a casually derogatory "You're Chinese!" called out in the schoolyard.

Racism is also a factor in the adopted child's next difficult period, adolescence, when many adults become conscious of their children's sexuality and

start worrying about miscegenation and their children's companions.

The normal adolescent identity crisis is triply complicated for the adopted Oriental child.

"All adopted children tend to have fantasies, whenever they're mad at their parents, that they have some absolutely lovely parents somewhere else. This may play a bigger role than ever because of the confusion of the situation in which many of them (the Vietnamese orphans) came," said Viola Bernard.

"That's why there has to be a slow-up," she said, referring to the children who came here in April without going through the lengthy screening usually required in adoption proceedings.

"This screening was done for about 2000 of the youngsters, but there were other children who were scooped up in the excitement, who with less crisis and commotion might have been relocated with parents and relatives.

"If there is some stabilization, these children should not be prevented from returning to Vietnam."

(U.S. District Court Judge Spencer Williams has ordered extensive investigations into the back-

grounds of the Vietnamese children brought here in April to determine whether they are indeed orphans or

should be returned to relatives in Vietnam.)

How Americans have come to feel about the Vietnam War and the refugees when today's orphans become teenagers will also affect this identity crisis.

"Some kids may get complicated about being adopted by the very people they may feel caused the problems, in the first place," said Viola Bernard.

A Language Sampler

AMERICAN

Rice
Water
To Eat
Happy
To Like
Love you
Homesick
Good
Bad
School
America
Father
Mother
Son
Daughter

VIETNAMESE

Gum
Nook
Ang
Shum suong
Tit
You
Nha nha
Tope
Sow
Trung hop
Me
Cha
Ma
Cawn try
Cawn guy

This vocabulary list is from a chart in an adoption guide issued to parents by the Holt Adoption Program Inc. of Eugene, Ore.

"Some families may be ignoring this possibility. Some may feel impelled to try to make up for it, but you can't make a family member out of a political symbol, just to prove you're not prejudiced."

If current resentment against the Vietnamese refugees hardens into prejudice, the adjustment of Vietnamese children in American families will be more difficult. Some adoptive parents hope that the peaceful settling of the refugees will provide pockets of Vietnamese culture that will benefit their children.

Finally, prevailing attitudes toward racial separatism will affect the way the Vietnamese feel about their adoption. Dr. Bernard points out that the adoption of black children by white families, once considered the ultimate in advanced liberal thinking, is now decried by black social workers.

In spite of it all, adoption agencies claim that most of these adoptions will work out fairly well. Only one or two per cent of intercountry adoptions in recent years failed to the extent the child had to be placed in another home.



The initial excitement of the Vietnam adoptions is over and the big adjustments are beginning

adjustments