Caring for Your Child

Speech and Language Development in the Internationally Adopted Child

The language development of internationally adopted children is different from the language development of other children. Children adopted from other countries where they were not immersed in English should not be considered “English as a Second Language” (ESL) learners or bilingual, as most of the time the children are no longer exposed to their first language and English becomes their primary language. When your child comes home and no longer hears his or her first language, this is called “subtractive language” or “second first language” acquisition.

For Children Adopted Before 2 Years of Age:
- Most children will have communication skills that appear to be slightly behind same age peers when they first come home
- After one year, the children are expected to understand language in the same way as other children of the same age
- Children may be slightly behind children of the same age in using spoken language to communicate until the age of 4 years
- Children are expected to produce age appropriate English sounds within 1-2 years of coming home

Risk Factors for Speech & Language Disorders:
- Your child came home after age three
- Your child did not experience a language rich environment as an infant
- Your child was not treated appropriately for childhood illnesses, such as frequent ear infections
- Your child did not have the care and attention needed from caretakers, such as in some orphanage situations

A Speech and Language Evaluation May be Needed if Your Child Does Not:
- Consistently look for you when you call his or her name
- Appear to understand phrases related to daily routines within the first three months of coming home; for example, “bath time” or “time for snack”
- Use gestures, such as waving “hi” and “bye,” pointing to request an item, reaching to be picked up, or letting you know that he or she needs to be changed
- Make or imitate sounds while playing with immediate family and when alone
- Try to say English words within the first weeks and months of coming home (if at least 13 months old)
- Engage in play activities, such as playing with dolls or pretending to pour into a cup
- Make eye contact or look at your face while you are talking
Internationally Adopted Children at School-Age

Children who are internationally adopted can be at risk for difficulties understanding and using the language needed to succeed in school, even if they learned language quickly when they arrived home. Children who are adopted at an older age face more challenges in school because they do not have as much time to learn English before starting school.

If you have concerns about your child’s ability to follow directions, understand written or spoken material, or understand the higher level language often used in school, a speech and language evaluation is recommended.

If your child is having specific learning difficulties in school, including writing or reading, or there are concerns regarding attention, hyperactivity, or anxiety, other testing may be needed, such as a neuropsychological or psychoeducational evaluation.

Pursue a Speech and Language Evaluation if:
- You are concerned about your child’s skills upon coming home
- Your child has a known medical or genetic condition that will affect speech, language, and/or cognitive development, such as cleft lip and palate, cerebral palsy, or autism spectrum disorder
- You have any questions about speech or language development

To schedule an evaluation with a speech-language pathologist at one of The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia locations, call 215-590-7462. Please specify whether your child has been evaluated by the International Adoption Health Program.

All children who are internationally adopted should have a hearing test. To schedule an appointment at a CHOP location, call (800) 551-5480.

Resources

http://www.rehabmed.ualberta.ca/spa/phonology/milestones.pdf – Language development milestones and general information from international adoption literature

http://pages.towson.edu/scheduler/index.htm – Language learning information following international adoption


International adoption is not a diagnosis. Keep in mind that all children are individuals and progress at their own pace.