

# Our International Adoption Packing List

## by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

You've got your packing list, all the baby stuff, the guidebooks, the INS approval (at last... there have been so many re-dos it's hard to believe it's done!) and the stroller. You are finally going to pick up your darling new one—but have you considered the missing list? In the rush of all the preparation, it is so easy to forget what it is going to feel like to become your child.

*On the day I met my own Guatemalan princess I remember the social worker who said, "we have some bad news..." I crumbled into my husband's arms, grief-stricken over this new realization that yet again I was going to lose my chance to be a mother. I didn't even hear as she went on to explain that the boy we had expected to adopt was now a girl. When my hearing re-cleared, I was crying again with the realization that now that she was a girl—miraculously, it was a girl who I had been hoping to adopt. Throughout, the process was about me, about my needs and my feelings, my exhilaration at meeting her, holding her, and having the opportunity to mother her...*  
— Beth

But what about her experience? What about her list of needs and stuff and dos and don'ts? What would our children include in their own packing list in preparation for life as a transracial, transcultural adoptee?

- Every child is entitled to love and full membership in her family. This means that as parents we need to let go of the glorified notion of adoption is a "wonderful way" of building a family or saving a child. Losing a language, a culture and (most scary for some of us who are adopting) a family is not ideal. Gaining a family who are able to love their child for who they are and care for that child when that child needs them is a positive. *But in an ideal world no child would have to choose.* Every child surely deserves parents who are prepared to acknowledge this truth and engage in as many discussions about the losses and the sadness as about the joys and happiness that adoption brings. Being prepared to embrace the fullness of the adoption experience for our adopted children means that we have the opportunity for a closeness that happens only when we dare to go to the deepest personal places where true feelings reside. It's not matching that makes us family, but the very closeness that most of us came to adoption to find.
- Every child deserves to have his culture embraced and valued by his family. This begins with the knowledge that we are reinvented by the addition of our children's culture

to our family. No longer the white family we may have started out as, we are now a family of color and life can never be the same. Are there concrete messages in our homes (because actions, not words, are the language of children) that say that we value our children's culture as much as our own? How many books by and for people of our own race/culture vs. theirs? How much artwork? Food? But more important, how many people do we love who look like our child? Who comes to dinner in our home? Who do we sit next to at our church or synagogue? Who have we had the courage to ask to be our mentor in our own journey to understanding how to parent this particular child who is certainly not the child we would have given birth to? It takes courage to admit our needs and fear, particularly to those who share something with our child that we do not. But culture is not learned it is shared, and without role models and guides, neither our children nor we can ever really understand. Do our actions demonstrate the importance of their culture or are we giving lip service to its value without really changing the things that matter to us in our lives?

- Every child needs parents who know that this is a race-conscious society. Our children's experience will be different than our own, because race and culture matter. Those of us who are white benefit from racism, which supports and profits us, even if we wish it didn't. Our children, whether of Asian, Latino or African descent, are the objects of racism and will be hurt by their experiences with it. We must train ourselves to be honest and realistic about how "our world" is going to work for our children by asking ourselves how "our world" would work for us if we woke up tomorrow with the skin color of our children. Would we feel comfortable? Would we be valued and understood? Would we always be the only one? Would we have friends and adult peers who shared our experiences and served as supporters?

Every child deserves to take pride in the development of a dual identity and a multicultural/multiracial perspective on life. Every child deserves to take pride in the fact that they found a way to risk being loved by us, their new family, despite the losses and hurts that they lived through before they came to us. Every child deserves parents who stop living the adoption experience through their own lists of needs and hopes and start living it through their child's experience in the context of their new "American" life.