

## **Older Children in Chinese Orphanages**

By Joshua Zhong

“Why haven’t older children been adopted in the first place?” “What happens to them?” “What can we do to help?” Adoptive families constantly ask these questions out of concern for this special group of abandoned children in Chinese orphanages.

### **Why haven’t older children been adopted in the first place?**

There are many reasons why these older children have not yet been adopted. First, the majority of adoptive families choose to adopt a healthy infant, most likely under 12 months old. Knowing the needs and desires of adoptive families, many orphanages have long been reluctant to report older children, generally age two and up, to the China Center of Adoption Affairs (CCAA) for adoption. Orphanages do not want to have to wait too long to have their children placed and to receive much-needed financial support from each adoption.

Second, according to the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs in charge of orphanage management, about two thirds of children under orphanage care are special needs children with physical conditions ranging from minor to major. In some orphanages, the special needs children population can be as high as 85%. However, less than 10% of special needs children are adopted internationally each year. In the meantime, even with the steady rise of domestic adoption in recent years, special needs children have almost zero chance to find a home, since domestic adoption focuses mainly on healthy infants. Therefore, among the older children left behind in orphanages, there is a high percentage of children with handicaps.

Third, some older children, most likely healthy, are still residing in orphanages because they were abandoned at an older age. When I visited the Beijing Orphanage last December, I saw four sobbing children, three boys and one girl, being comforted by the caretakers. I quickly found out that they had arrived just two days ago. The orphanage caretakers told me that they receive older abandoned children almost every month. Many of these kids are victims of their parents’ second marriage. In China, children from a previous marriage may still be considered “unacceptable” in a new marriage. It is not uncommon in China to hear stories of child abuse by stepparents.

Fourth, two-thirds of orphanages in China are not involved in international adoption for various reasons. Many children grow up in these “closed orphanages” without any chance to find a loving home. Even among the “opened orphanages,” some younger children were not reported for international adoption due to an either temporary or prolonged illness. As a result, many of them miss the chance to be adopted when they fully recover at an older age.

Taking care of these older children, from education to employment, poses a tremendous challenge to orphanages.

### **What happens to them?**

Chinese law requires mandatory free education of all children up to high school, so most orphanages send school-age children to their local elementary, middle, and high schools. However, the miscellaneous supplies and fees required by schools can be very burdensome to poor orphanages who receive as little as 200-300 RMB (\$25-37) per child each month from the government. They have to rely on public support, if they are lucky enough to get it, to keep their kids in school. In addition, due to missing “parental” support and supervision, students from orphanages tend to have more academic struggles and more issues with getting along with others. (By the way, we have also seen quite a few older adopted kids who were straight-A students in China!). In light of all these challenges, the actual percentage of orphanage children attending school is well below the required 100%.

Higher education is available to orphanage children if, first, he or she can pass the very rigid three-day National Entrance Examination (like the SAT’s in the US but much more grueling), and second if his or her orphanage is able to financially support his or her education. Facing these hurdles, those orphanage kids who are able to go to a college are truly in the minority. Most are left with the challenge of finding a job to support themselves.

Different orphanages have different practices in terms of the upper age limit of children under their care. Some orphanages will release their healthy children and children with minor physical conditions to society when they reach the age of 16, and some orphanages do so at the age of 18. Orphanages usually assist these older teenagers to find a job, and the government encourages companies to hire handicapped workers for appropriate jobs for some tax incentives. However, due to the fact that there are plenty of handicapped people in society and the very high unemployment rate in most parts of China (where even a college graduate might have difficulties landing a job), orphanages constantly face an uphill battle to convince companies to accept their children.

Many older healthy children choose to stay in the orphanage and work as caretakers, cooks, drivers, or in other positions that their orphanage can find for them. Some will join the army, an easier channel for a “job.” Still more are picked up by traditional skill groups, like acrobats, which require painful training: groups that have a difficult time recruiting kids from “regular” families who are reluctant to allow their only child to go through this hardship. If a marriage-age orphan working in the orphanage gets married, most likely to another orphan, the orphanage will provide them with some basic housing.

Severely handicapped children will be transferred to a government-run adult social welfare institute when they reach the age of 16. This represents the end of the orphanages’ responsibility. If these severely handicapped adults reach an older age, they will then be transferred to a retirement home supported by the government.

### **What can we do to help?**

Orphanages have reported their struggle to care for older children. First, although the government has been providing surgical expenses for handicapped children, orphanages are left to find money to provide daily medical care and rehab for their children. They

desperately need the medical and therapeutical knowledge to ensure the long-term well-being of their special needs children. Second, the prolonged stay in an orphanage has resulted in severe “orphanage syndrome” in many older kids. A lack of social skills, a feeling of isolation, over-sensitivity and extreme aggression, and a lack of independence are reportedly common among older orphanage kids. Third, vocational training is urgently needed to help these kids to master a professional skill after they leave the orphanages. Unemployment and subsequent homelessness of older orphanage children could potentially mean more “social problems,” as a large orphanage director recently stated.

Chinese Children Adoption International has been working with many orphanages to find solutions to the challenges of caring for older orphans. We have been educating and encouraging local orphanages to report older children’s information to the China Center of Adoption Affairs and assuring the orphanages that if they are reported, families will adopt these beautiful kids. Our efforts in the past few years have resulted in great progress and we have seen an increased number of older children coming home. Moreover, the medical missions, therapy teams, Love for Older Orphanage Kids (LOOK) Project, and educational support projects that CCAI has spearheaded over the past decade have positively impacted many older orphans’ lives. Another project under discussion is to recruit older adopted kids to visit orphanages and befriend the older orphanage kids for the purpose of improving their social skills, raising their self-esteem, and most importantly, giving our older adopted kids a precious opportunity to make a difference and allow the older orphanage kids to receive the love they deserve.