

FAMILY MATTERS

A Stressful Summer Holiday?

Bringing a newly adopted daughter to meet the family

➔ My little girl started school today.

She donned her uniform and carried a bag. She found a place for her cup, then was far more interested in all the other cups that belonged to other children. She found toys almost immediately; found them fascinating and otherworldly and shrieked with delight at the sight of them, and then guarded over them, making sure that no other child might take them. Mine, she said, holding them close. Mine, she said, holding them close. Mine, and a smile that tells you she's only playing. But that really, she's not.

Mine, my little girl. Suddenly all big.

I can't believe it has happened so fast, can't believe that she has grown so big in such a short time. Almost exactly nine months ago, my wife and I disembarked a plane into a bright but cold Beijing lunchtime. We had been away from home less than a week and we carried with us a new and beautiful daughter. Her name is Little.

She is not so little any more. In just nine months, her life has completely changed. She has had to forget everything that she knew—or at least get used to (and not be afraid of) everything we all do and take for granted: our routines and our diets, our ways of killing time, of having fun and going to bed; the way that we show love, and that we actually do.

But we have had to learn too, and some of what we have learned has been heartbreaking. It's getting easier now but, back then, she didn't cry when we put her to bed because, in the orphanage, she had learned that no one would come. And when she woke, she wanted to be fed (actually, needed to be fed), to quickly calm down from a sleep that seemed not to settle her. She is calmer now, and she seems to be traveling less between the extremes. I used to think she had never known peace.

To see her now, to see her strut around school like she owned the place, to pick up toys like they were a god-given right—but not in fear that they might be taken away—that was unexpected. Sometimes I think back on the initial tantrums—the lashings and

bashings—that she used to unleash on a family not entirely prepared for her emotional state. When I think of them and see her now, I feel like we have done amazing things. I feel proud; shocked and awed by how far we have all come.

In the summer, we went back to the UK. We went back to the UK so that Little could meet her broader family, that of generations, and of siblings and friends that amount to the same thing. I was terrified.



The plane scared me in its inability to get there sooner, quicker. That I would be stuck in a metal tube for a double digit amount of hours with no escape and nowhere to hide from the eyes that might seek to criticize our new addition.

And the prospect of our families worried me; what if Little couldn't cope, what if she couldn't cope with the change, with the shock of the new: the faces and places and the primal need for families to protect Little—to try and make her happy, to talk to and hold her. And what of her big sister, whom we now dub Big? How would Big cope with no longer being the only light in their eyes?

It all turned out fine. Our families and friends were amazing, and both Big and Little were on fire. Big loved the fact that she

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had Little to show off, and Little just loved the attention. My wife and I just felt proud; proud that we had two daughters for people to fawn over, proud that we had made it this far.

It was a long and hazy summer that I think everyone will remember.

When we took Big home for her very first Christmas, everyone at home appreciated it and thanked us. With Little, it was a summer and her second birthday. I'm not sure, but I

think that might have been an even bigger deal. For Big, the occasion was implicit and assumed and taken for granted. It was much more tenuous with Little, and I feel grateful that no one made it feel so.

Before the summer holidays, Little had her operation. Ten days in the hospital to have the hole, the cleft in her palate, sewn up. It was overheated and stressful. We had Big at home, but we needed to be there with Little. There was blood, way too much blood. There was sweat and there were tears. She hated all of it. (And to this day, will still not have her teeth brushed, such is her association with

intrusion to that second most intimate of cavities.)

It is all for the best. Everything that happened in the past nine months has led up to today. Little is amazing. She is robust, resilient and reticent; she cares not for her advantages in life, nor for that which might limit or restrict her. She is tough, as we have all learned to be: strong because we are loved, because we are needed.

Because we need each other. ●



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