



Child Returned to Russia FAQ's

Q: When did WACAP learn of this situation?

A: WACAP learned of this situation on the morning of April 8, 2010, Pacific Standard Time, when the Ministry of Education informed our Russian representative in Moscow that a child had been left at their office after being sent back to Russia unescorted. WACAP immediately reported this to all relevant government offices, including the Tennessee police department, the local Child Protective Services office, and state and federal offices.

Because WACAP believes children deserve to grow up in loving families, in the rare cases when an adoption is dissolved we work to provide a new family for the child. While WACAP does not condone returning a child to their country of birth, in the extremely rare instance when a family with legal custody of the child insists, and if WACAP and the foreign country agree it is in the best interests of the child, WACAP will assist the family with the process of bringing the child back to their birth country.

Q: What is happening with this case now?

A: After learning about this situation and reporting it to authorities, WACAP began investigating the situation. WACAP will report what we learn in our investigation to Russian adoption authorities.

Q: Why didn't WACAP catch that there was a problem?

A: Confidentiality laws prohibit WACAP from sharing details about this specific case. However, we can share that all WACAP families receive post placement services. Russia requires four post placement visits and reports over three years. When families adopt older children, WACAP's post placement services often go beyond those which are required by the placing country. WACAP is one of a limited number of U.S. agencies that has consistently met all Russian obligations to provide post placement services and reports for the hundreds of Russian children we have placed in loving families in the U.S.

Adoptions from Russia are considered final (with all the rights and responsibilities turned over to the adoptive parents as if the child were born into the family), and a U.S. agency has no legal right or control over the adopted child or family; however, WACAP strives to maintain a positive relationship with all families and always remains available to provide assistance to families

experiencing difficulties. Adoptions dissolutions occur in about 1 percent of WACAP adoptions and, in these instances, WACAP places the child with a new family. If WACAP has any indication that a child is not safe or a family is having difficulties, WACAP makes every attempt to assist them.

Because an adopted child is seen as the full and legal child of his or her adoptive parent, WACAP cannot legally interfere without evidence or being requested to do so. Once an adoption is finalized, many families consider contact with their agency to be unnecessary. However, if WACAP has reason to believe a child is not safe, we act immediately. In addition to our concern for each child, U.S. state laws obligate us to take all necessary steps to protect the child.

As would any parent, adoptive parents have the legal right to travel with their adopted child away from home for an extended period without advising the agency. If a family is away for a month on vacation or visiting family, and if all other evidence indicates a very successful adjustment, the family's being temporarily away from home would not be cause for intervention.

WACAP uses every resource to work in the best interest of each child. Of course we cannot make a 100 percent guarantee about any child or parent's future behavior. In this rare case, the situation was heart-rending. Still, we believe that adoption work is vitally important—without it, tens of thousands of children would grow up without families.

Q: What does WACAP do to ensure an adopted child's safety and the positive adjustment of the child's new family?

- Prior to any adoption, WACAP conducts a careful investigation of each family (see below for more details), which includes federal and state criminal and child abuse history checks.
- WACAP requires that each family complete a minimum of ten hours of training as well as a Parenting Resource Plan—a 13-page questionnaire that includes three pages dedicated specifically to developing the resources necessary to handle the challenges of adopting an older child.
- WACAP provides several older child training opportunities for families prior to or after placement.
- WACAP maintains an online chat board for families who have older child placements that is monitored by a WACAP social worker.
- A WACAP case manager talks with each family when the family visits their child's birth country and contacts each parent within days of the child's arrival home.
- WACAP adheres to Russia's required post placement visits with the child and family four times after placement at six, 12, 24 and 36 months after the child is home. WACAP is available for additional post placement visits, and, for older children, additional visits are typical.
- WACAP offers assistance to families with adjustment difficulties.
- In those rare cases when a parent determines the adoption cannot proceed, WACAP finds a new family for the child.

Q: How does WACAP screen parents for adoption?

A: WACAP follows the requirements of the states in which we are licensed, the federal government and the Ministry of Education in Russia. WACAP always meets Hague requirements (the gold standard for adoption services) regardless of whether or not we are working with a Hague country.

WACAP investigates each prospective adoptive family through several in-depth interviews conducted by experienced, Master's-level social workers to determine the family's emotional and marital stability. Each family completes a detailed, guided autobiography including information about their social history, each spouse's extended family, their marriage, work, social activities, parenting experience, etc. Issues such as motivation to adopt, the challenges of adopting an older child, single parenting, marital challenges with the addition of a child, finding personal support resources, a child's need to grieve over loss, cultural identity, growing up adopted and many others are also discussed with each family.

Applicants are required to complete medical examinations, submit financial information and verifications, provide several personal references, write autobiographies, and pass nationwide criminal history checks via fingerprinting through the FBI and checks of child abuse records in all states where they have resided. Russia also has additional medical and legal requirements, such as proof of residency and employment information, that are supported with medical, financial and occupational evidence. Families must provide birth certificates, marriage certificates, divorce papers and other documents when applying for adoption. In addition, social workers discuss all expectations, limitations and risks associated with international adoption with each family. WACAP scrutinizes each applicant from every perspective and is prepared to respond if state and local authorities and judges have additional questions about any family.

WACAP requires each family to complete at least ten hours of training that discusses the typical issues of adopted children. Parents are also required to complete a Parenting Resource Plan that requires detailed research into local resources that deal with children's issues and proposes various "what if" behavioral scenarios for children who have been abused, neglected, institutionalized, and/or affected by drugs and alcohol. This document helps parents understand the difficult behaviors a child may exhibit, and asks them to write out a plan for dealing with each situation. The Parenting Resource Plan is completed and reviewed by WACAP prior to the family being approved to adopt a child.

Post placement visits for Russian adoptions are made for three years after a child comes home. In addition, social workers are available by phone to all families, and WACAP maintains an internationally-accessible online chat board that allows families to post questions and concerns about their older children. This chat board is monitored by a WACAP social worker and also allows other adoptive parents the chance to offer their suggestions and share their experiences.

Q: Does WACAP believe that single-parent households are a good choice for children coming into new homes?

A: It has been demonstrated and documented that single parents can provide an excellent family for a child. WACAP considers each applicant individually for their strengths and ability to parent. When matching a child with a family, WACAP considers the needs of each child.

Q: How thoroughly does WACAP investigate the agencies it deals with in states outside of their service area?

A: WACAP investigates each homestudy agency with whom we work cooperatively to be sure that the agency has all the proper credentials and training. We verify that appropriate members of their staff hold Master's degrees in social work and/or equal experience with adoption. We maintain a copy of the agency's licensing documents from the agency's state licensing authority. WACAP also consults licensing authorities to learn if there have been any issues with an agency before entering into any partnership. Every homestudy written by an outside agency is carefully scrutinized as part of the WACAP approval process.

WACAP is very transparent with the Russian government in identifying who conducts and writes any family's homestudy document.

Q: If a child's biological parent is an alcoholic, would the prospective adoptive parent be advised of this?

A: WACAP always shares all information received about a child with the prospective adoptive parents. In the case of Russian adoptions, the child's background information documented by the government is quite thorough. Also, WACAP tells adopting families repeatedly that they must be open to many unknowns about an adopted child's past, and how it might impact the child's future. There are no guarantees with adoption.

Q: Has WACAP had situations where families learn new information while in Russia?

A: WACAP documentation advises adopting families that they may informally learn new information not previously provided to us about a child when they travel.

All families travel to Russia twice. The first trip allows the adopting family time to meet and spend time with their child. At this time, families are encouraged to ask questions about the child. When they return home after the first trip, it is expected that they will take the child's medical information to a doctor who specializes in international adoption medicine. For children adopted from Russia, the international adoption specialist will typically review the family history and examine the child for signs of fetal alcohol exposure. Generally speaking, medical providers discuss the effects of alcohol exposure with all families adopting from Russia.

After fully considering a child's information, a family makes the decision to accept the child for adoption or to wait to be referred another child. If the child is accepted, the family returns to Russia for the second trip several weeks later. On this second trip, the family has additional opportunities to speak with the government and orphanage staff if they have questions. The family also attends a court hearing, where a Russian judge carefully asks many questions related

to why the family wants to adopt the child and their commitment to the child. The international adoption process in Russia is one of the most arduous, conscientious and careful of all countries participating in international adoption. Russian judges are to be admired for their thoroughness with adoption documents and adoptive parents.

Q: How often do these kinds of disruptions happen?

A: In over 34 years of working in adoption, WACAP has found families for nearly 10,000 children, over half of whom were older children or children with identified special needs. About 1 percent of all WACAP's adoption cases have resulted in dissolution. In these cases, families typically welcome WACAP's support and help in finding another home for the child.

When families have adjustment difficulties, WACAP is always there to offer assistance. WACAP is present for all families during the post placement follow-up period with visits, phone calls and e-mails. **When a family is honest and forthcoming about a child's adjustment difficulties, WACAP responds immediately. If there is a desire to dissolve the adoption, WACAP offers support to the family and searches for a new family for the child.**

Q: Is this child a U.S. citizen?

A: Children adopted from Russia into the U.S. are citizens of both the U.S. and Russia.

Q: How will this episode affect WACAP's work with the Russian government for future adoptions?

A: It is difficult to predict how this distressing situation will impact adoptions from Russia into the U.S. WACAP's first and foremost concern is the health and welfare of this child and the other children for whom we are helping to find families.

The Russian government is very careful when reviewing and approving agencies to perform adoption work. Russian adoption authorities accredit only those agencies that they feel will provide high-quality, professional adoption services. We are hopeful that, after investigating the circumstances surrounding this tragic but isolated incident, Russian adoption authorities will see that the standards reflected in WACAP's accreditation documents are present in the actual work done in this case.

We are working with the authorities in Tennessee and Russia to fully understand the situation and how the family's circumstances could have changed so quickly.

Q: How can similar situations be avoided in the future?

A: WACAP works tirelessly to ensure successful adoptions and encourages families to embrace asking their agency for help when needed. WACAP also supports foreign governments in asking U.S. officials to create laws prohibiting foreign abandonment of children by U.S. citizens,

investigating cases of foreign child abandonment, and, when circumstances dictate, prosecuting foreign child abandonment to the fullest extent of the law.

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