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In Some Adoptions, Love Doesn't Conquer All



Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

PLAY TIME Kelly Lytle Baehr, center, plays with her three adoptive sons, from left, Ian, 10; Erik, 10; and Viktor, 18, at their Omaha home. She adopted them from Ukraine two years ago. [More Photos »](#)

By [SARAH KERSHAW](#)

At times, Kelly Lytle Baehr wondered how they would all get through it. Two years ago, she and her husband adopted three boys from Ukraine — two of them 8, the other 16 — and brought them back to their home in Omaha. She knew assimilation into a family life would not be easy; all had come from troubled backgrounds, including one who had spent the first five years of his life in a prison orphanage back in Ukraine, and had a mother who drank while she was pregnant.

She was often tested by the strains of raising these three new sons. The youngest of them, Ian (born Igor) had rummaged in garbage dumps in Ukraine for toys, with hub caps and discarded car parts his only possessions. At the Baehrs's home in Nebraska he soon became a wild, uncontrollable kleptomaniac, she said. The other 8-year-old, Erik, struggled to attach to her — kicking, screaming, biting and yelling, "I hate you." Only the oldest son, Viktor, seemed to welcome his new life quickly, blending easily into the family and eventually making the honor roll at his high school.

When Ms. Lytle Baehr, who is going through a divorce and has custody of her children, heard the news break two weeks ago about Torry Ann Hansen shipping her 7-year-old adopted son back to Russia on a plane, unaccompanied, with just a note to the authorities, she felt something approaching sympathy. "When it boils

down to it, I'm really similar to the woman in Tennessee," Ms. Lytle Baehr said in a telephone interview this week. "We've all been there."

The incident seemed unimaginable to most: a mother discarding her young son as if he were a defective product. It generated round-the-clock discussion on the cable networks, front-page coverage in many of the country's newspapers, and even something of an international incident, with reports that Russia was suspending all [adoptions](#) to the United States indefinitely.

It also struck an emotional chord — and even perhaps a slightly sympathetic one — among families across the country who have gone through the process of international adoption and know how difficult the adjustment can be. And it raised questions about how much American adoption agencies know about the background of the children they are bringing in from foreign countries, and whether parents are adequately prepared for the challenges ahead of them.

"You can't ever think you are getting a clean slate," said Victoria Barrett, who lives in Tiverton, R.I., and adopted two children from orphanages in Siberia, a boy and a girl, now 8 and 7. "You can't think that all you have to do is love the child and everything is going to be fine. It's not like that. It takes specialized parenting."

Ms. Barrett said she had learned this through trial and error over years of difficulties with her daughter, Renee, who had trouble bonding with her mother and other classic symptoms of institutionalization, anger and acting withdrawn. She has taken both of the children to a counseling program for adoptive families monthly for the last three years, with additional phone therapy for the parents as needed.

The other day she said she was discussing the Tennessee case with her children and Renee asked her, "Why can't that mommy do what we do and go to Boston and talk to a counselor?"

That's a question others might be asking as well. "Most of these parents are grossly, grossly ill-prepared," said Ronald S. Federici, a developmental neuropsychologist. "Agencies saying they do all this training and support — that's a bunch of junk. Some do, most don't. A lot of families are uneducated at huge levels about the psychological trauma of being deprived and neglected, of under-socialized children who have had profound developmental failures."

Russia is the third largest source of adoptions to the United States, after China and Ethiopia, with about 1,600 adoptions in 2009, according to State Department figures. About 3,500 Russian children and 3,000 American families were in some stage of the adoption process when the country reportedly halted adoptions. Russia has been a popular choice because the process can be much faster than in countries like China, and because there are often more boys available.

But adoptions from Russia have slowed in recent years, as the country has placed more emphasis on domestic adoptions and required more paperwork and visits from adoptive families.

The majority of both international and domestic adoptions turn out well, but the Hansen case has shined a spotlight on those that are problematic and the need for more post-adoption services for struggling families, adoption experts say. Some agencies, including the one Ms. Hansen used, offer extensive training and preparation and continuing support services, training parents on issues like fetal alcohol syndrome and the psychological and neurological effects of institutionalization on children. Studies show, for example, that for every month in an orphanage a child's I.Q. drops one point.

“Most reputable agencies try to drum into the heads of prospective parents that they need to be prepared for risk and a wide range of possibilities, that they have to give some serious thoughts to this,” said Kathy Legg, executive director of Spence-Chapin, a well-known adoption agency in New York. “Sometimes we give them the worst story and scare them away.”

But services available after parents adopt are erratic — comprehensive in some places and nonexistent in others — and state budget cuts are eating away resources to fund them, advocates for adoptive families say.

ELLEN McDANIELS took her daughter, whom she adopted from Russia in 2001 at the age of 8, to therapists for years. The child spent her first five years in an orphanage and was later adopted by two families who ended the adoptions before Ms. McDaniels, who lives in western Massachusetts, and her husband adopted her. Ms. McDaniels, 52, said she later discovered the child had a history of being sexually abused and was sent to the orphanage when she was 18 months old, after her mother, an alcoholic, died of tuberculosis. A psychiatrist diagnosed severe reactive attachment disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, and an inability to understand or have remorse for her actions, Ms. McDaniels said.

The girl later would tell her mother, “The voices inside me are telling me to have sex with little kids and kill them.”

Finally, two months ago, after what Ms. McDaniels described as nine years of frightening, exhausting and heartbreaking efforts to cope with her daughter’s behavioral problems — including, she said, her sexually abusing and threatening other children, threatening to burn down the house, hiding knives in her trundle bed, refusing to take medication and running away — she terminated her parental rights. (When parents end an adoption, legally terminating their parental rights, it is known as a disruption. Parents turn their child over to the custody of the state, through a children’s agency, or, more likely, contact their adoption agency for guidance on how to end the adoption. The adoption agency can then try to find the child another home.)

“We lived a life of hell,” Ms. McDaniels said. “I stayed up all night, when my husband slept. We had alarms on the doors; she tore them off. The more I asked for help, the worse it got. I became the warden.”

She reported the problems to the state child protective agency, and eventually the child went to a state-run residential treatment center for a year. When Ms. McDaniels told the state she could not handle taking the child back, she said abandonment charges were filed against her but later dropped.

The decision to end the adoption, even after so many awful years, was heartbreaking, Ms. McDaniels said, and she was wracked with shame and guilt.

“I felt that I was a failure and that I condemned her to a life of hopelessness,” she said. “I knew I couldn’t help her, but I knew I didn’t want to throw her away. But sometimes as a parent you feel like you have a lot more power than you do. You say to yourself, ‘Can I make a difference in this child’s life?’ And if the answer is no, you need to walk away.”

“I don’t agree with what Torry Hansen did,” she said. “But I almost think there’s a certain little part of me that says, ‘You just saved yourselves nine years of torment.’ Knowing what I know now, I would have given up sooner because a lot of people got hurt.”

AN adoption gone awry is how Wendi Morton, 58, and her husband, Trevor, who live in Carthage, a small town in East Texas, ended up with their son Elijah, a little over five years ago. Mrs. Morton had two

biological children from her first marriage, and she and Trevor decided they wanted to adopt another child together.

The couple began pursuing an adoption from Russia, and completed mounds of paperwork, but then learned through other adoptive parents Mrs. Morton had met on the Internet that an 18-month-old infant with fetal alcohol syndrome had been given up by his American adoptive family and needed a new home.

Because Mrs. Morton was interested in adopting from Russia, she had learned about the syndrome, which is more common in Russia than in most countries, adoption medicine experts say, and said she recognized the signs as soon as she met the baby in Dallas.

“He couldn’t chew, he didn’t walk, he had very serious delays, autistic-like behavior,” she said. “His hands were flapping all around. He had some of the facial features, all the things you read about it. But I can’t explain it, I just knew he was ours.”

The child, now 7, was originally named Oleg. His first adoptive family named him Ethan, and then the Mortons named him Elijah. The first few years were rough.

“He would fight you with every power in his little body not to face you,” Mrs. Morton said. “If you touched his face or head, he would scream and cry. He was perfectly content to sit in his room and spin in a circle, or rock, or hit himself on the head.”

The Mortons have paid for speech therapy, occupational therapy and other services for him. They said they were happy when they were able to place him in a special-needs classroom, though they don’t know if he will ever be able to live on his own.

“We’ve never regretted a minute of it,” Mrs. Morton said. “I’m not going to say that this has been an easy road, but he is honestly our little miracle.”

The couple then adopted a girl, Grace, from Guatemala, who is now 5 and in perfect health.

Then Mrs. Morton hired a private investigator to find out more about Elijah’s family. He tracked down an older brother, Nikolai, who had been living in an orphanage in Siberia since he was 2. Two months ago the Mortons brought him to their home as well.

The boy, whom the Mortons call Paul, does not have fetal alcohol syndrome. But he has other health problems and, as the Mortons have learned in the last two months, overwhelming rage. He injures himself, banging his head on walls and biting and bruising himself, melting into fury when he is told he can’t have what he wants.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like that,” Mrs. Morton said. “We were fearful that somebody was going to think we harmed him.”

She took him to doctors. She called the local adoption agency, which she did not want to identify because a friend of hers is in the process of adopting through the same agency, to ask for help.

“I told them the ugly truth of the things that were going on. What I got was ‘I’m real sorry to hear that, I hope things get better,’ ” she said.

And it's not easy to ask for help, she said. When she goes to church or meets people around town, everybody tells her what a saint she is for taking in these troubled children, she said.

"You always get this, 'Oh you're wonderful,' and all this, and the whole time you are thinking, if you only knew how upset I get at this child, how I really don't like him sometimes."

But, she added, "I love him. I have loved him for over three years. Although I didn't lay eyes on him, I have been in love with this little boy for all this time. And just like my biological children, I cannot fathom turning my back on him."

There are no reliable statistics on how often adoptive families decide to give up their children, because many states do not keep track of children after they are legally adopted. But there is growing research, with a new study being started next month by the Attachment and Bonding Center of Ohio, into the phenomenon, which researchers said appeared, at least anecdotally, to be on the rise.

And some advocates for adoptive families — who note that the majority of domestic and international adoptions are successful — say parents should feel less ashamed of considering the option of disruption. It could have been better for Ms. Hansen's son, Justin, who might have found another family, they said, although the Associated Press reported that three Russian families had come forward offering to adopt Justin.

"Disruption should come out of the closet," said Susan L. Caughman, editor and publisher of the magazine *Adoptive Families*, which features articles on how parents in need of support can get help. "It's a horrible decision to have to make. But if you can't parent a child, if you're not prepared to do all these things that have to be done, don't struggle in silence."

Typically parents must sign a waiver with their adoption agencies, who say they cannot be held liable for problems with a child that were not previously disclosed to the agency, and advocates say that reputable agencies make clear the risks associated with international adoption, because often children are abandoned at birth or orphanages do not keep complete medical records.

Earlier this week, all seemed fine at the Baehr home, with Ms. Lytle Baehr posting this status update on her [Facebook](#) page: "Enjoyed dinner with the boys at a fairly questionable Mexican restaurant. Followed it up with some rocking Black Eyed Peas at home and a family dance party! Whoo hoo!"

But the past is never far away. During a telephone interview, Ian was talking about how he liked living in the United States because it was "more peaceful."

Then, asked where he was from, he said, "I'm from jail."

Those early months were a difficult adjustment for all. But after six months of counseling to help with his impulse control, common in older children who have been both institutionalized and exposed to alcohol in the womb, things improved for Ian. And he seems to know how fortunate he now is.

When he turned 9 and received his birthday presents, he told his adoptive mother, "I wish I could take what I have now and give it to myself when I was little."

Correction: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Kelly Lytle Baehr's struggles with her children were one cause of the breakup of her marriage.