

# The joys and challenges of adopting the older child

## One mom's story

By SHARON MACGREGOR

Carol and John Sadowski have been married since 1998 and share their Burlingham home and life with their twin daughters Marta and Emma and youngest daughter, Olga. Although how they came together is quite untraditional, the challenges they have faced over the years have tightened their bonds, cementing them just strong as those found in most birth families.

The story begins almost 12 years ago when the couple adopted twins Marta and Emma after attending a Happy Families International Center Folk Fest event at a local church. (Happy Families is an adoption agency in Cold Spring that works with orphanages and foster care homes in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Guatemala.) Although the original child the Sadowski's had in mind didn't work out, they agreed they wanted the child, between five and ten years old, that no one else wanted. Fairly quickly, they found their daughters, who already had a brother adopted by a nearby family, and after a 28-day visit to Russia, Carol brought her girls home.

### The family grows again

Years go by, and one summer the annual Happy Families picnic coincides with the Folk Fest, and Carol is asked to host Olga, a young girl for the remainder of her



Carol and John Sadowski are surrounded by the daughters they adopted from Russia. Like birth families, they struggled, but made it work.

photo courtesy Carol Sadowski

stay, for just three days. The catch? She's already been with four host families and seems to be a bit of a handful.

Joyce Smith, regional adoption coordinator for Happy Families remembers bringing Olga over from Russia. "She was a special child, and I knew I had to find a family for her." Carol didn't hesitate. She said, "Yes." By the time Olga was to return to Russia, she cried to her translator, "No, I don't want to go. She [Carol] is my angel." Though they were not planning on another child, and

didn't have the finances necessary, Carol and John welcomed Olga into their family and together tried to make it work.

### Adjusting to their new world

One of the earliest challenges the sisters faced was actually not their own; it was the other children who were either slow to accept them, or as Carol thought, "may have been a little afraid" of the two second grade girls who didn't speak, read or understand English.

Carol remembers going into

their second grade classroom and telling the story of *Little Orphan Annie*. "I told the kids there were real orphans in this world, without mom's and dad's, and how her girls were just like them, looking to have friends," she says, and adds, "I reminded the kids how lucky they were."

### Communicating through sign language

Before the girls grasped the English language, they excelled at sign language, Carol says. "We learned a lot about their lives that way, they showed us how they had to scrub floors, or wash dishes, or how often they went hungry."

Carol credits the support her family received from Happy Families; especially from those who spoke Russian who acted as translators, and the support groups and opportunities to meet other adoptive families. Carol even learned a bit of Russian herself, enough to ask the girls if they were sick or hungry. Or if they were okay.

### Happy ever after

Despite the struggles, financial and emotional, Carol says without hesitation, "This has been the best experience of my life...If I had the energy I would do it all again."

Her girls have grown up to be three delightful young women. Emma attends Eastwick College in Ramsey while Marta is enrolled at Orange County Community College in Middletown. And, Olga is a junior in high school, a cheerleader with wonderful grades attending an advanced English class.

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More photos of the Sadowski family, and resources for parents interested in adoption.

## If you're considering adopting the older child



Denyse Variano

There are unique challenges to adopting the older child.

For one thing, there is a fact you can't change," says Denyse Variano, RN, and a family educator from Cornell Cooperative Extension, "you can't undo history, both genetic and environmental."

Adoptive parents may never know what the child experienced before they came into their lives, like "were there years of instability, drug use, or was the parent unable or unwilling to raise them." And if the birth parents died, what was the effect?

She adds that parents can't go into this thinking that as long as they provide "love and meet the needs of the child, it can make up for past losses." It can be complicated.

And with any adoption, the older the child gets the more they may need an understanding of *why* they were adopted, was it from a death, or was the parent unable or unwilling to care for them. The child may need to visit their birthplace, or their birth parent, and may even go through a period where they may want to go back and live with their biological parent. The adoptive parents, cautions Variano, "should not take this personally, but understand it as a natural curiosity."

Realize that there may be a honeymoon period, says Variano, where the child may be afraid of showing who they really are. Don't judge the early phase as how things will always be. Parents may think this is just the most wonderful child and the most wonderful experience. Just be aware that this period may not last."

### Ways to make it work

Create a secure nest, says Laurie Slavin, adoption attorney and executive director of Hudson Valley Adoption Services in Kingston. "There may have been developmental phases that were missed or cut short, and the child may need the opportunity to experience or re-experience in a more secure way in order to heal the brain and pave the way for healthy emotional development."



Laurie Slavin

Helping older siblings to become knowledgeable caregivers and to fully participate in the rebirth of the newly adopted child into the home can be spiritually fulfilling for all family members, and may go a long way toward dispelling sibling rivalry, she says.

Take the prep classes, join ongoing support groups, and even seek private counseling when necessary are ways to tackle these issues. And, spend time together as a family in low stress activities.