

Adopted children from the former Soviet Union

Are they at risk of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder?

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Abstract

Question One of the families in my practice is considering adoption of a 2-year-old child from the former Soviet Union. The family has been reassured by the agency that a doctor will examine the child to rule out developmental delays. However, my understanding from your previous articles is that one cannot rule out fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) at that age. Are these children at increased risk of developing FASD?

Answer You are correct: FASD cannot be ruled out at 2 years of age. The risk of FASD, neglect, and abuse among children in orphanages in the former Soviet Union is high. While adoption of children with known developmental delays should be encouraged and supported, most families seek to adopt with the assumption that these children will be healthy.

Enfants adoptés provenant de l'ancienne Union soviétique

Sont-ils à risque du trouble du spectre de l'alcoolisation fœtale?

Résumé

Question L'une des familles qui fréquentent ma pratique envisage d'adopter un enfant de 2 ans en provenance de l'ancienne Union soviétique. L'agence d'adoption a assuré à la famille qu'un médecin examinerait l'enfant pour exclure la possibilité de retards développementaux. Par ailleurs, si je comprends bien vos articles antérieurs, il n'est pas possible à cet âge d'exclure la présence d'un trouble du spectre de l'alcoolisation fœtale (TSAF). Ces enfants sont-ils à risque de développer un TSAF?

Réponse Vous avez raison: on ne peut pas exclure la possibilité d'un TSAF à 2 ans. Le risque de TSAF, de négligence et de mauvais traitements dans les orphelinats de l'ancienne Union soviétique est élevé. Bien qu'il faille encourager et soutenir l'adoption d'enfants ayant des retards développementaux connus, la plupart des familles qui cherchent à adopter veulent présumer que ces enfants seront en santé.

A study by Miller and colleagues of 193 “healthy” young children (age range was 2 to 72 months) in an orphanage in Murmansk, Russia, found that the mothers of these institutionalized children had had complex histories, including chronic health problems (38%), use of alcohol (41%), and use of illicit drugs (7%).¹

In 10% of these children, FASD was diagnosed. In 11% of the children in the study, there was mild developmental delay, in 25% moderate, and in 28% severe. Thirty-eight percent of the children exhibited microcephaly, and 60% had behavioural problems, many of which might have been part of undiagnosed FASD. While living at the orphanage, stunted growth of the children became even more severe.¹

Hawk and McCall followed 316 postinstitutionalized Russian adolescent adoptees and identified a high incidence of extreme behaviour. Their analysis documented that adoption after 18 months of age was a risk factor for higher problem scores, using the Child Behaviour Checklist.²

The same group further documented that attention and externalizing problems were the most prevalent behavioural issues³; it is important to remember that these domains are an important part of FASD, and it is conceivable that many of these children are affected by heavy prenatal alcohol exposure. The authors surmised that early psychosocial deprivation is associated with behavioural problems.³ Moreover, these children might be especially vulnerable to the developmental stress of adolescence and to underlying encephalopathy caused by alcohol. The damage to the children correlated with the severity of the psychosocial deprivation and its length, in a “dose dependent” manner.

Parents seeking to adopt institutionalized children from the former Soviet Union have the right to receive correct information, such as the data presented in the studies above. Knowledge of maternal drinking patterns during pregnancy is key, because at the time of adoption at 1 to 2 years of age, many of the signs of FASD are not yet apparent in children. Health

professionals blatantly mislead parents if they tell them that if the child is “healthy” at 1 to 2 years of age then FASD can be ruled out.



Competing interests

None declared

References

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2. Hawk BN, McCall RB. Specific extreme behaviors of postinstitutionalized Russian adoptees. *Dev Psychol* 2011;47(3):732-8.
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