



## Social competence in internationally adopted and institutionalized children

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### ABSTRACT

A growing, sizable proportion of school children do not live in conventional family environments. Among these, internationally adopted children have gained increasing visibility in recent years. While other areas of their behavior have been widely explored, little is known about adopted children's social competence and their integration into peer groups. This study, involving 148 children between 4 and 8 years of age, compared 40 internationally adopted children with 50 children who were residing in institutions for children and 58 community comparison children. Social competence, problems with peers and friendship relationships were assessed using SSRS and SDQ, with both parents/caretakers and teachers as the informants. The sociometric status of the children and their friendship relationships were obtained through their teachers' reports. The results showed statistically significant differences between children living in institutions (more problems with peers, poorer social skills and sociometric status) and those in family environments, whether adopted and non-adopted. Also, the results suggest some minor differences between the adopted and the comparison children, the former with greater visibility and the latter with higher sociometric status in the peer group.

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In the US, some 130,000 children are adopted every year, with adopted children representing 2–4% of the children's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). A similar percentage has been found for certain European countries, such as Sweden (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002). Moreover, according to Selman's (2009) estimate, nearly a million children were adopted internationally in Western countries between the end of the Second World War and the present. In the past two decades, intercountry adoption has become extremely prominent in Spain, to rank as one of the world's top countries in terms of intercountry adoptions per live births nationwide, with Russia being the main sending country to Spain (Selman, 2009).

The admission of the internationally adopted children into their new schools raises a number of interesting questions regarding their integration into peer groups. However, according to Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010), further research is needed to unveil the nature and meaning of the school experience for these children. In fact, most of the extant adoption research on this topic deals with adoptees' school performance (see meta-analysis by van Ijzendoorn, Juffer, & Klein Poelhuis, 2005). The goal of this article is to analyze the social competence and peer relationships of a group of internationally adopted children, comparing them to a

community children group and another group of institutionalized children.

In terms of school achievement, and according to the meta-analysis conducted by Ijzendoorn et al. (2005), adoptees outperform academically their non-adopted siblings as well as their peers who remained behind in the institutions. Similar results were obtained from a comparison of Spanish adopted and institutionalized children (Palacios & Sánchez-Sandoval, 1996), which is unsurprising, as most institutionalized children were separated from their birth families due to different forms of abuse and neglect, and failed to benefit from the healing effect of a positive family experience later in life.

Compared to school achievement, much less is known about these children's social competence and peer relationships at school, which is a serious limitation given the importance of these aspects for child development and child wellbeing (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008). The negative impact of early institutionalization on later peer relationships was documented in the classic study by Hodges and Tizard (1989), in which children who had been in English institutions until the age of two and subsequently adopted or restored to their original families displayed an array of difficulties in terms of their peer relationships at age eight, including being over-friendly, quarrelsome, and unpopular. These difficulties were reported only by their teachers, as their parents did not regard these children as any different from their peers.

More recent research on adopted children's peer relationships has yielded mixed outcomes. A Dutch study of internationally adopted children's sociometric status showed a significant

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difference with a comparison, non-adopted group, with the adopted children being significantly more popular than their non-adopted peers, due to the higher prevalence of popularity among internationally adopted girls (Stams, Juffer, Rispen, & Hoksbergen, 2000). On the other hand, a study of the peer relational difficulties of a group of institutionalized Romanian children who were subsequently adopted into English families, compared with a group of early UK adoptees, found little difference at age six (Rutter, Kreppner, & O'Connor, 2001), but more difficulties in the Romanian adoptees at later ages (Sonuga-Barke, Schlotz, & Kreppner, 2010), although these difficulties were only apparent in children who had suffered more severe early deprivation.

Besides these apparently contradictory findings (possibly due to the use of different constructs measured with different instruments at different ages with different populations), little is known about the social skills needed to develop healthy peer relationships in children who suffered early adversity and were later adopted into families deemed suitable to respond to their needs. From the one side, the well-documented higher incidence of externalizing symptomatology (including hyperactivity and oppositional defiant behavior; Simmel, Brooks, Barth, & Hinshaw, 2001) among adoptees could jeopardize their integration into the peer group. But an enhanced presence among the adoptees of some of the skills needed for competent social integration has also been documented in a US study by Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1996), in which a large group of adopted adolescents showed higher levels of prosocial behavior than their non-adopted classmates.

Even less is known about the social development of institutionalized children, a group which tends to be invisible to both the general population and researchers alike. Although disturbances in the social development of institutionalized children are frequently mentioned (Save the Children, 2009), their social skills and peer relationships while in the unchanged institutions have been under explored. A study of the social integration at school of children residing in Spanish institutions showed a higher incidence of rejection by peers for academic tasks than for other more informal activities, as well as more negative descriptions by both teachers and peers (Martín, Muñoz de Bustillo, Rodríguez, & Pérez, 2008). But with few other exceptions (Roy, Rutter, & Pickles, 2004), most of what we know about the development of institutional children comes from studies conducted on them after their adoption (e.g., Juffer et al., 2011; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2010) or after the introduction of intervention programs aimed at improving their experience while in the institutions (The St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008). According to Browne, Hamilton-Giachritsis, Johnson, and Ostergren (2006), institutional care is “over used” across Europe and is also a problem in many other parts of the world. This is particularly true in Spain, where the increase in intercountry adoption has been coupled with a decrease in domestic adoptions, and where most children in need of protection who are not fostered by their extended family are sent to institutions for children while a more permanent placement decision is made (Palacios & Amorós, 2006).

More research is therefore needed to increase our understanding of the social competence and social integration of internationally adopted children. The comparison with institutionalized children is relevant, as it reflects how the adoptees might have been faring had they not been adopted. Spain is a particularly well suited context for such a study, as it affords the paradox of very high levels of intercountry adoptions together with similarly high numbers of institutionalized children (Browne, 2005). By comparing domestic institutionalized children, intercountry adoptees, and a group of comparison children living with their families, all between four and eight years of age, our study sought to explore three main issues: their social skills and social competence, their sociometric status, and their friendship relationships within the

school context. Their developmental status was also considered in order to explore its potential interference with the outcomes that lie at the core of our study. Regarding the three topics of interest, there were two main hypotheses: (1) Differences between the three groups were expected, with the outcomes favoring the comparison community children (with no adversity). Intercountry adopted children (early adversity followed by a positive family experience) were expected to do better than institutional children (early adversity followed by an institutional experience) but not to differ from the comparison group, as they had already been living within a family environment for a significant period of time. (2) The group differences were expected to be significant regardless of the children's age and gender. However, the developmental status of the children was expected to play a role (more problems in those with more developmental delay), as well as time after adoption (better outcomes for those with more time in the adoptive family), and length of institutional experience (more problems for those with longer exposure).

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 148 children between four and eight years of age (45% were pre-school and the rest were between six and eight years old), 145 parents/caretakers, and 107 teachers. The children fell into three different groups: international adoptees ( $n=40$ ), children residing in Spanish children's institutions ( $n=50$ ), and a comparison sample of Spanish children who lived with their birth families ( $n=58$ ). The average age of those from the comparison group was 75.17 months ( $SD=14.61$ ) at the time of the study (compared with 75.68,  $SD=14.22$ , for the adoptive group and 77.60,  $SD=17.89$ , for the institutionalized group). The adopted children were born in Russia and had arrived at their adoptive homes at an average age of 36 months ( $SD=16$ ); for this research, the children were studied at an average age of 40 months ( $SD=14$ ) after their arrival. As is the case with adoptions from Russia, the percentage of boys (72%) was clearly greater than that of girls (28%). In the other two groups, the distribution by gender was homogeneous. Those in institutions for children had been separated from their family at an average age of 64 months ( $SD=21$ ), and some of the children in this group had shorter institutional experience than others, with 8.5 months as the median value.

The adoptive families were contacted through two international adoption agencies that specialize in adoption from Russia which served as a liaison between the families and the researchers. Both agencies contributed a similar number of cases and were alike in terms of their policies and practices. Although the two agencies work in different regions of Russia, the characteristics of the children from both agencies were similar in terms of their age and length of institutional experience. Ten of the 50 families approached chose not to participate in the study due to unexpected problems and circumstances (for instance, parents did not want the child being observed and tested again after a recent mandatory post-adoption follow-up). The children's institutions participated thanks to the authorization and mediation of the child protection authority of the region in which the study was performed. The families of the comparison community children were contacted through the schools. The participating schools (10 in total) were chosen at random and represented different neighborhoods and socio-economic levels in the same city where most of the adopted children and all the institutional children lived. Letters to families were sent inviting them to participate in the study, with 10% of the families opting not to do so.

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