

SLOW CHILDREN AT PLAY



ABC's

SLOW CHILDREN AT PLAY - ABC's for the Family

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ADOPTION

"The best day was the day you returned," Ben said to Gaby. Ben is our 5 1/2 year old son, Gaby our 5 year old daughter who returned with me from my adoption trip to China. The first hug and kiss from Gaby was to Ben. She had seen him in the photo book prepared by my wife Janet for me to take along. Gaby knew her new family before we were all brought together at the Nashville airport in July. We call her Gaby, short for Gabrielle, and she wears her name well. Gaby learns words with remarkable speed and accuracy.

"Grass," I said.

"Grass," she repeated. Gaby seemed puzzled at the trees and grass. She knelt down and grasped handfuls of it. Grass. Chinese officials estimated she was born January 18, 1992. She was found, abandoned, near a hospital in Changshu. She was taken to the Kun Shan orphanage. Later, she was taken to another orphanage which was capable of processing international adoptions. All children in the second orphanage were given the surname YU, to which was added the name given to her at the first orphanage, KUN. Documents referred to her as Yu Kun. She called herself mei mei (meaning little sister) and Kun Kun

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(pronounced Quinn Quinn) but took to the name Gaby readily.

In the fall of 1995, a representative from Children's Hope International visited China and made video tapes of children for adoption. Our family saw the video and found ourselves drawn to her beautiful dark brown eyes. Many things occurred but we stayed the course and I boarded the plane to travel to China on July 13, 1996. Gaby has a home now, and she continues to grow and delight herself and our family.

Many things give me reason to reflect on her beginnings.

"For cooking'?" Gaby asked. She pointed at the flames in the fireplace. We had just come in from the hot tub on a recent chilly evening. When the sun went down behind the Tennessee hills the temperature fell fast. I had turned on the gas logs and her question incited questions and images in my mind. Did she deduce the purpose of fire? Did she recall its use from her former place half way around the world? I believe her childhood memories will be strong. They have a partition at age 4 1/2. Before that time was China. Birth, survival and all it implies to the western mind, abandonment around 2 years of age, discovery and placement in a life-bridging orphanage. When she was handed to me in July of 1996 in the Din Shan Hotel in Nanjing, she displayed a strong healthy cry - she rebelled briefly at another

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abandonment. The orphanage director said she was happy the previous day, and even said, upon being challenged by another child, that it didn't matter because her American "Papa is coming to get me."

Such is the stuff of legends, myths, and wives' tales (at-home dad's tales too) or so it struck me. I had read translations of Chinese stories. They told of tricksters and ghosts and immortals. In the 'Song of Mu Lan' a young girl goes to war dressed as a man to take her father's place. She keeps her secret and returns home a hero and only then reveals her secret to her comrades. Gaby's life, too, holds many secrets though some may never be revealed. China has always been shrouded in mystery. And revelation, when it comes, invites, though it is not always met with, enlightenment. Gaby came to us clean and fully able to bathe herself, brush her teeth, clean up, dress herself, feed herself, and she brought an appetite for life and everything it had to offer. She was 28 lbs. and 89 cms. Six months later she was 32.5 lbs. and 100 cms. At first, she could not negotiate steps, up or down. Now she climbs and descends with ease McDonald's play land.

She still loves noodles best of all her foods, and also anything on her mommie's plate which she eats while happily

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perched on her mommie's lap. And this gives me an insight into her make-up and growth. While food sustains life, human contact sustains hope. Gaby's hope. The hope of a child.

There are vast areas of unknowns for our family about Gaby. How and why did we find each other? How and why did she survive her scars'? How and why did she survive exposure to TB and hepatitis'? How and why did she survive malnutrition and severe infection'? Somewhere along her journey she was given hope. It may have been the beating of her heart pressed against another. The human equation that binds us all together, where east and west do meet.

Gaby and our son Ben play together now. They have strong wills. Somehow and somewhere they find common ground and language. Like rolling in the sweet-smelling grass, or jumping in the piles of leaves.

These are the places where hope - a child's hope - is rewarded.

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BIKING

It's like riding a bicycle. Once you learn you never forget how to do it.

My children have had training wheels for a while now. Our neighbor has gently urged my son, Ben, to ride without the training wheels since spring arrived.

"You won't be needing those training wheels much longer," our neighbor said.

Ben smiled not sure how to respond.

"Maybe just a little longer," he replied.

Or Ben would say he would take them off in the summer, after school was out.

Some people must have a special sense of timing. Probably it's a talent that we all have to some degree, but some fine tune the ability with frequent exercise.

About a month ago, Ben's friend visited for the afternoon. When he saw our bikes he wanted to ride.

"Can you take the training wheels off?" L asked.

I found my wrench and removed the wheels.

"Just steady me while I get started," L directed.

While I held the bike steady, L climbed on and I nudged him

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forward. True to his word, he pedaled away. I watched briefly as the five year old circled the driveway and returned. He braked and placed his feet on the ground.

"I want to try," Ben said.

"Me too," said my daughter, Gaby.

I held the seat and handle bars while Ben got on. Then as he pedaled I found myself walking faster, and then jogging to keep up.

Occasionally, I let go for a second or two to gauge his balance. Then I grabbed hold to keep him from falling.

Gaby of course, was certain she could do anything Ben could do. She had her turn.

"I am finished," Gaby said.

Her arms were tense from holding the wriggling bike.

L's turn produced skillful displays of bikemanship. I talked with Ben about the need to use the helmet.

He and Gaby understood. They seemed to know that falling was a greater likelihood on a bike without training wheels.

"You need ten lessons before you learn everything," L explained. "Lesson ten, you learn how to pop a wheelie."

He told Ben and Gaby that a wheelie was riding on the rear wheel while balancing the front wheel in the air. His attempted

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demonstration was met with frustration. He explained that he wasn't used to Ben's bike though he liked it very much.

I thanked him for giving my children their first lesson. They were both proud of their efforts. I sensed their confidence in future success. They had after all seen a friend, their peer, who had accomplished the task well.

The next day I ran beside Ben as he practiced again. And Gaby had her turn.

On the third lesson, we showed mom the skills they had learned. As I grew winded, my wife stepped in to hold the bike. As I watched and rested, I saw Ben pedal as she released her grip. Five feet, ten feet, he rode unassisted. Then she stopped, but he kept on going.

"Brake," I yelled.

"Keep going," she yelled.

I don't know if Ben heard either of us. But I hushed myself and watched as he biked down the street on his own.