



“Been There! Done That!”

*Or, “How To Hop, Skip, Jump and Stumble
Through Single Parent International Adoption”*

This book is lovingly dedicated to our daughters, and to the many children in countries around the world who are waiting for a family of their own.

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And thank you to the phenomenal staff and volunteers of The Children's Bridge. Through their expertise, dedication and support, we have become the parents of beautiful children. They have our sincere gratitude, always.

Introduction

It has been almost two years since I returned from China with my daughter, Bryanna Mei-Lai. Sometimes I just cannot believe it.

It has been a time of unbelievable excitement, happiness, busy schedules, exhaustion, worry, stress, financial hardships, and joy, joy, joy.

During these 22 months as a new parent, and as a single parent by choice, I looked for a lot of help and advice - from friends and family without a doubt, but just as importantly from the Children's Bridge community. The CB families were the ones who knew what Bryanna and I were experiencing, and could offer real-life examples, anecdotes, and words of support.

But for the single parent, advice and support from the single parent community can be even more critical. How reassuring it is to know that others have experienced the complete exhaustion of being the sole caretaker for a newly adopted baby or toddler; that they, too, have had to stretch every dollar, especially during those months on leave; that they understand that our daughters are eventually going to ask where the other parent is, and that they can provide suggestions on how to approach that topic in a loving, sensitive way.

I have spoken to many single moms and moms-to-be (and one single dad!) over the last 2 years, and I came to realize how helpful it would be if we could gather the experiences of some of those who have **Been There! Done That!** into a booklet for those just starting out. How great it would be to flip through the pages and find a funny anecdote just when we are ready to tear out our hair in frustration. Or to be able to look up tips on traveling on our own with a small child, or dealing with the "terrible twos".

And so this book was born. It is a slim volume at the moment, with stories relating mostly to the adoption process, and baby & toddler-hood. Perhaps as our children grow older, we will add to this book in order to discuss the school years and peer pressure and dating (yikes!) and our children's search for identity. Wow – so much to come!

Finally, you will note that there are many specific references to China throughout these pages. However, the majority of these stories and supportive comments can apply as easily to our single parents who adopt from Vietnam or other countries.

Happy reading, and remember, you are not alone!

I wish you much joy with your beautiful child.

Lianne Thompson
Singles Coordinator
Children's Bridge

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"Love is what makes you smile when you're tired."
Terri - age 4

The Wait

Fill that waiting time. Use it. I read everything I could get my hands on: “Jan Wong’s China”, travel books on that country, books on child development and self-esteem and health. I surfed the web and read the postings in the Children’s Bridge chatline. I painted my kitchen, and applied for a job transfer. I cleaned out my closets. I started telling people about this major life decision I had made - and was overwhelmingly delighted with the support I received. Projects and tasks took me from one month to the next. Before I knew it, the referral pictures arrived. Hallelujah!

The wait from DTC to referral seemed to go by quickly - a lot of time was spent doing things "for the last time as a single person before I'm a parent", as though I would be going incommunicado as soon as my daughter arrived. There have been a few brief moments where I wished I didn't have to give up so many things, like: night courses (French, Mandarin), theatre, travel to far away places etc etc, but this is not at all to be confused with regret over the adoption, just a sense of the unknown - not really knowing precisely how difficult or easy it would be to be a single parent.

The hardest wait was between referral and travel, when I knew there was a little girl over in China in a particular city and in an orphanage waiting for me. Before the referral, it was an unknown baby in an unknown city, but once I knew, I wanted to travel the next day to get her.

During the waiting time, I “rewarded” myself on a regular basis. Once my documents were couriered to Children’s Bridge, I celebrated by buying a crib. I chose colours for the nursery when I was assigned to a travel group. I spent the months leading up to the referral decorating the nursery and window shopping at Baby Gap. It was fun and exciting and the little “rewards” were a definite pick-me-up during that interminable waiting period.

I knew very little about babies and I used the wait period as a time to learn key stuff. Prior to that I kept myself in ignorance so I wouldn't become too frightened. When I decided to learn about baby care items I truly did become frightened because an experienced mom explained nasal aspirators to me and I was struck with the truth about babies – they can be really disgusting!

The Trip

The most important things to bring to China are patience, understanding and compassion. Although many of the babies we receive are not in the type of care that we are used to in the west, they are cared for and loved. I have yet to meet a Chinese person who does not adore children (I cannot say the same about people at home). Westerners have a tendency to arrive in China expecting it to be different, however, they quickly forget this and want to have things the way they would be at home. You will be home soon enough so enjoy the uniqueness of this culture. Expect the unexpected, and that will ensure a wonderful and memorable trip!

I spoke to everyone I could about what to pack, what to expect, and then I asked again. I met some other CB single moms two months before I left for China and I listened, enthralled, to everything they told me. Knowing more about what to expect relieved some of my anxieties and heightened my excitement.

If you have the choice, take a companion with you on the trip. Make it someone you like and trust. You may need to lean on someone for support – so make sure you can depend on that family member or friend. You do not want to have someone with you who is just along for the ride. I had 3 family members accompany me – I don't know how I would have managed with less! (*smile*)

The trip was wonderful - I'd been to China before and have travelled to many far-flung destinations, so I didn't have any fear of the trip - just the fear of being a parent and having a baby placed in my arms. Strangely, throughout the entire process, the one scary vision I had was about the long plane ride home holding a crying baby in my arms. Once again, reality turned out to be different and she slept half the way home.

I was the only single in my group and for some strange reason, my father, his wife and I always ended up on a different floor in the hotel from the rest of the travel group. Looking back, I wish I had spent more time getting to know the people I spent two intense weeks with - we were all so distracted, we didn't really get a chance to get to know each other.

There were three singles in my group. Two of us were so stressed out by the end of the first day that we threw up in our respective bathrooms! It seemed overwhelming to me at first: new environment, first-time mom, single parent, sick child. But then, on day number three, Bryanna smiled. That's all it took and suddenly the trip became the most memorable, wonderful and joyous time I have ever known.

I wish that someone had told me in advance how much fun the trip would be. I brought along a friend who was invaluable to me and the 3 of us (including baby) had a great time. It surpassed all expectations and I only wish that North Americans loved children like the Chinese do. I miss China.

IF YOU TRAVEL ALONE ~ when you receive your child it may be difficult to do many things in the beginning. This is how to accomplish the simple tasks – with humour!

1. Bathroom

- Toilet....hold baby like a football, always wear clothes that are slip-ons to avoid the zipper button combo;
- Teeth brushing....put baby on counter and give her a toothbrush of her/his own. If baby doesn't allow you to put her/him down...insert one foot into sink and prop baby between foot and counter, (football hold works here too)..this acts like holding the baby, fools them into thinking you're still holding on to them;
- Shower....good luck, if baby sleeps at all and you care what you smell like at this point, take a shower then. Unlike me...I was too darn tired to care what I looked like or smelt like, showers were a rarity.

2. Sending E-mails from China

Sit in the chair provided, prop baby in lap and wrap one leg around them so to act as a seat belt...give them a piece of paper, bottle, the lid of a disposable cup, a box....you get the point....anything so you can get the three word e-mail typed...

3. Carrying Luggage, Shopping bags, and diaper bag

When no one is around to help.....??? I don't remember how I accomplished that...find a little 7 year old that wants to make a dollar??? Oh and leave the purse behind, no need for makeup...there is no covering up those bags under your eyes and the hormonal imbalance showing on that face!

4. Eating

You eat when she tells you to....that's why you'll lose so much weight after the adoption, bring lots of Boost, or cereal bars.

5. Sleep

Don't bother picking up after yourself when she's asleep, the queen is sleeping and so should the jester. Let the room fall apart....GET SOME SLEEP! It's more important than eating....

The First Week

I came home from the airport, put Sophie in her crib and she went to sleep. It all seemed so easy. She didn't seem to suffer from jet lag one bit and it seemed as though in a couple of days we were back to normal (whatever that means, given that here I was with a baby to look after).

I was warned to expect 2 to 4 weeks of time re-adjustment (jetlag issues) – I was stressed after 2 nights! But on the fourth night, Bryanna slept through the night and we've never looked back.

The first week was the best and the worst in some ways. Because it took some time for us to get over the jetlag, I was very tired and highly emotional. And I was both a single parent AND a new mom, and I really didn't know what the heck I was doing. I have to say, a couple of times I would go in and look at my daughter in her crib and think, "Did I do the right thing? Will I ever feel like this little baby's mother?"

Sleep was an enormous help. This is my advice: if you have a baby who is not sleeping through the night right away, make sure you have someone who can stay with you at your home and take turns getting up. Believe me, this really, really helps!

Baby was a dream. Adjusted quickly and was healthy. However, I was sick and this was something that I hadn't planned for. My advice is that you have a backup team to support you if some unexpected occurrence arises. I could have used more help during the first week.

The First Months Home

I've always said to people that I'd rather have spent 24-7 with Sophie from the ages of 8 months to one year than from the ages of birth to 4 months. In other words, no regrets at all about "missing" the first 8 months of her life. Strangely enough, I think more about those first eight months now, three years later, wondering who she lived with, how she spent her days and what she was like as a baby. Still, my four months off with Sophie got to be a bit tedious and routine. It was the dead of winter and we couldn't exactly go for walks outside, so we went to Wal-Mart and Shopper's Drugmart instead (they had carts for Sophie to sit in!).

Bryanna was 10 months old when we came home from China. Developmentally, she was assessed at the 5 month level. This was actually great – I had a “baby” for a short period of time but then within 3 months or so, she had caught up to her age level and stopped drinking from a bottle and eating baby food. She also was moving around on her own and was more independent. As a single mom I found that quick jump to “older baby” a wonderful thing!

Can we discuss the “arsenic hours”?

In my first two months home, one of the things I did was book an appointment with the public health nurse to come for a home visit and look at my daughter's development and overall well-being. She was a friendly woman, and after playing with my little girl and discussing how she was progressing, she relieved my mind by telling me that she appeared to be right on track. And then she looked at me closely and said, “And how are YOU doing?”

When I paused before answering, she went on to say that becoming a new mother can always be a tough adjustment, and it can be even harder on the single mom. I told her that I thought I was adjusting quite well, but I found that by 4:00 in the afternoon I was usually very tired, that I had gone through all the age-appropriate games, songs and toys at my disposal, and that the remaining hours until bed-time seemed to stretch out forever. I said this hesitantly, feeling like a total wimp and failure.

But that angel nodded in complete understanding and said “Ahhh. The arsenic hours.” She explained this statement as follows. Those three or four hours before bed-time are the hardest part of the day – especially for the full-time care-giver. It is toughest on single parents because they have no partner to hand the baby to at the end of the day, and say “okay, your turn!”. Any worries you might have are mostly kept to yourself, and any tiredness you feel cannot be addressed until the baby is in bed.

Wow. It was like a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders. I wasn't alone in this feeling! I wasn't the worst mother in the world! The nurse suggested a number of great ideas – plan for a guest at dinner, or go to someone else's house (you don't have to be

rude – a lot of your friends would be glad to see you!). You don't have to have a gourmet dinner – order a pizza. Having company is a wonderful thing – conversation with an adult while they also play with the baby! She also suggested late afternoon trips to the park (or shopping mall, if it is Winter). Just wandering around with the baby in a stroller, both of you taking in new sights, sounds and experiences, is a great spirit-booster. Schedule your baby's bath for after dinner, if possible. This fills in some more time and is also a relaxing event for the baby (unless she hates baths!). Phone a friend or family member at this time – the baby can sit in the exer-saucer or playpen while you chat.

Things became a lot simpler for us after that. Even now when I'm back at work, I keep the "arsenic hours" in mind on the weekend and make plans accordingly!

I decided prior to leaving for China that I needed a strategy to ensure that my spirits stayed positive during those first months. I was concerned about being alone with a baby for such a long period of time since work had been an important part of my life. So I picked one goal that was entirely for me and focused on it as soon as I got home, even though I didn't feel like doing it. I started training for a marathon using the 5 months of leave that I had scheduled. I had a baby jogger so she "coached" me the whole way. Each week I started to feel more like my old self and by month #3 I was clearly "back in the groove" again with baby being key to my life but not being the only focus of my life. Picking a goal that was exclusively for me was definitely healthy.

Bonding

At first I found it very painful and hard when MacLean would look up at me and cry. She didn't put her arms up to me, and when I said "mama is here" she cried more. Thank goodness this only lasted two days and when I would go to her she would put her arms up and smile. She got to the point in China where she would look to me when she heard my voice. My sister, who came with me, was wonderful. She allowed me to spend all my time with MacLean and she worried about everything else. Carrying the bags, paying bills, looking after all our needs and details. We laugh now because at the time we didn't realize that my sister was pregnant in China, and now the joke is about Shauna making her do all the hard work in the heat (we went in August) and I just worried about MacLean. I am reminded of this often and we just laugh. It did make all the difference as MacLean and I are very close and I wouldn't have done it any other way.

I bonded instantaneously with Sophie. She was placed in my arms in the hotel room, in dirty, grimy clothes, split pants with her red bum exposed, her face all scrunched up with tears streaming down. But it was an immediate sense of "she's here and she's mine and she's terrific" for me. For Sophie, by the end of the two weeks in China, she knew I was "the one" - my father said that when I would leave the room, she would stare at the door until I came back.

I initially thought that Bryanna and I bonded quite well, and very early. Once she recovered from the cold and chest congestion she had had in China, she was a content baby and would happily allow herself to be picked up by myself, or my parents or my sister (all of whom accompanied me to China).

Too, I thought we had bonded early because Bryanna could definitely differentiate between me and my family, as opposed to strangers. Very early on she would not happily go to someone else unless she had had time to get to know them. What I noticed after awhile, though, was that she did not lift her arms to be picked up, nor hold on to me when I cradled her. She seemed happy and content (and I think she was) but I have the distinct impression that she was biding her time and seeing if things were going to change again, as they had so often in her young life.

Looking back now, I would say that it was a good 5 months before the bond was truly there. By then she was calling me "mama", would cry if I left her with someone unfamiliar to her, and would only be comforted by me if she was sick or frightened.

Five months may sound like a long time, but I don't particularly think it was. By then, I truly "felt" like her mom - the short period of post-adoption blues had passed, I watched in awe as Bryanna accomplished each new thing – and most of all, Bryanna had learned about love and gave me the greatest honour of my life by bestowing that gift upon me.

I wouldn't trade the six months of "getting to know each other" for anything!

I'm quite the contrarian on this item. I think that the bonding word should be stricken from our vocabularies. My belief is that each day we grow a little closer. And in many ways it's the "bad" days that pull us closer together. As she learned to hug me, kiss me, and reach out to me, we became more and more of a family. But I believe that this is only the tip of the bonding ice-berg. As she grows and the outside world presents more challenges to us we will continue to grow in our love.

Sleeping (or not!)

Sophie was a better sleeper when she was younger. She used to sleep through the night until about 18 months. Then, for more than a year, she would wake up several times, sometimes crying, waking me in the process. I was starting to get stressed, wondering if I would ever get a full night's sleep again. I don't know why she started having trouble sleeping when previously she didn't. I have no idea whether this has anything to do with her early months before I met her or not. But by approximately 2 ½ she was sleeping through again. Maybe it was just another phase.

Sophie sleeps with me most of the time, but the "family bed" is not something I talk to a lot of people about. It seems as though everyone has an opinion on that subject, usually strong and often negative ("once you get her in your bed, you'll never get her out!" is the usual pronouncement) but I really think it's more common than one would think, especially among internationally adopted children who are used to sleeping with others close by.

The first couple of weeks, she would sometimes cry softly when I put her to bed at night. As long as it wasn't hysterical, I would sit outside her room until I heard some "quiet" periods amidst the crying (meaning she was listening to see if she had convinced "mommy" to come in) and then I would go downstairs and just listen through the monitor. I never went back in (is that terrible?) unless it reached the hysterical stage - which it rarely, rarely did. By not going back in, she would cry on and off for 30 minutes and then she'd be asleep - and sleep through the night. After the first few weeks she stopped crying at bed-time and would gurgle contentedly. This process wouldn't work for everyone, but it did for us.

Maclean slept for 12 hours the first night I got her and when she woke up, my sister and I looked at each other and said, "wow if this is what parenthood is like, we will definitely keep her!" I used, and continue to use, the trial and error method most of the time. When we arrived home, I established a bed-time routine that continues to work like a charm. She has a special toy, blanket and her Peaceful Planet Aquarium from Fisher Price. Each night we read books, and then I tuck her in and turn on her Aquarium and then her special lullaby. Now she says, "mama don't forget my music and my fish" (aquarium). She likes her routine and will ask to go to sleep at night when tired. I think that is amazing.

These days, now that Bryanna is talking, she usually chats and sings to herself for up to half an hour before falling asleep and sleeping through till morning. She wakes up fairly early (6:30 - 7:00), which is fine during the week, but on weekends I go in and change her and give her a sippy cup of milk and put her back in the crib with books and toys. She will play quietly for another 35 minutes! (Giving me time to relax, change, put on my

make-up, read a magazine for a few minutes, whatever - and then I'm much more ready to face the day!)

Crying at bed-time is now only reserved for times when she knows there are "fun" people still in the house (nanny & papa, for example) and she doesn't want to go to bed. Then she reverts to her "fake" cries which are meant to bring me back into her room. These trail off within 5 minutes, and we have to try not to laugh when we hear (through the monitor) "No, mommy!" said in a very angry little voice. Obviously not TOO pleased with her mom at those times. Also, when she is sick, she is much more wakeful, but usually will put herself back to sleep. The one exception was when her temperature spiked up at 12:30 in the morning and she woke up and started SCREAMing hysterically. Boy, it's amazing how we learn to differentiate between all those cries. I whipped in there, and ended up taking her to the hospital to be checked (she was fine - just a virus and the temp came right down).

I've been blessed with a great sleeper. I was given advice from Grandma who suggested letting her cry for 5 minutes. If she stops at any point during the 5 minutes the clock is reset to zero. If the crying continues past 5 minutes then I should go in and rub her back/head. This advice seems to have worked very well for us. Of course the exceptions to this rule include illness or agitations such as screaming, but generally bed time has not been a challenge.

I used to dream (pre-baby) of going in and hanging over her crib and watching her sleep each night. What I discovered is that while she is a great sleeper, she is not a DEEP sleeper. And she becomes very restless between 10:30 and 11:30 at night. She will wake up if I make a move to go into her room and check her, or even open the door (I still leave the door cracked, though). So in the Winter months, I dress her extra warmly at bedtime (sleeper, undershirt AND socks) so I don't have to worry about going in to check her blankets during the night, and I never enter her room after 9:00 pm (unless there is something wrong, of course). This has resolved the starting awake periods and sudden crying.

Bryanna is just over 2 ½ years old now. I have always been so grateful for her long, deep, undisturbed sleeping cycles. But three weeks ago she experienced her first "bad dream", or, at least, was able to intellectually understand what nightmares are and remember them into the daytime hours. For three nights after this, Bryanna became hysterical at bed-time, chanting and screaming over and over "Mommy, I don't WANT to go to sleep!" Nothing seemed to appease her ~ she didn't want a night light, she didn't want me to hold her hand and stay with her (though she would have been quite happy to come downstairs and watch television!) Reassurances, songs, stories didn't help. My worry and stress levels started to rise as I struggled to deal with what so many parents had experienced from day one. Finally, the solution! On the third night, I offered to let her hold a flashlight in bed. For some reason, this was of more comfort to her than a simple night-light – perhaps because she could control it and it was "fun". Three weeks

later she still wants the flashlight (I go in after she is asleep and move it from her bed to her bed-side table within easy reach) but now settles peacefully in bed without a whimper. And each morning, she happily says, "no bad dreams, mommy!" Who knows if the fact that she is learning to control her fear will last through the next episode, but my respect for this little girl increases daily.

In the beginning, I knew Samantha was tired and she seemed to need soothing, so I tried rocking her...tried pacing with her....tried feeding her. (I would have changed her diaper - but that wasn't needed.) Finally, I just sat down and cuddled her. She finally fell sound asleep. From others I discovered what the problem had been - Samantha had probably never been held before as she went to sleep - If I had just put her down in the crib, she probably would have fallen asleep right away. (You live and learn!!) And as Donna Booth, our single Mom over in Beijing, pointed out to me, as a working Mom, this is not a bad habit you really want to break - the baby being able to put herself to sleep. I took those words of advice to heart - and my little angel goes to bed smiling and falls asleep easily.

Eating and Drinking

At almost 8 months, Sophie was eating Swedish meatballs, mashed potatoes and lingonberry sauce from the get-go (we stayed in a Swedish-owned hotel in Beijing). Whoever was her foster mother did a wonderful job of getting her started off on the right track foodwise - I've never fed her bottled baby food (not quite true - I tried a few times, but she didn't really like it). She has always been a good eater and will eat things I won't and likes to try anything. She seems to prefer vegetables, noodles and rice over anything else and so far hasn't developed much of a sweet tooth. I've been very fortunate that she has not been a picky eater.

Bryanna, at 10 months old, had only ever had bottle-fed formula as far as we could tell (probably with rice cereal mixed in). She did not understand how to eat from a spoon and we had to work on this. It took three days of concentrated effort before she understood that the thing that we kept sticking in her mouth was good stuff. But finally she got it – and wow! Her weight gain in the first four months home amazed even her doctor!

Today, my 23 month old daughter ate a sparerib for the first time. I have never been so delighted in such a messy spectacle in my whole life.

My daughter had been fed only from a bottle at the time of adoption. However, her love for food meant that anything coming near her mouth was consumed. Unfortunately, once she started eating from a spoon she lost interest in the bottle which was a great concern as I worried about her consuming enough liquids. This was a challenge for the first 6 weeks or so. Even trying different nipples, etc. didn't seem to help much. But suddenly one day she decided that drinking 16 ounces of formula at breakfast would be a good thing and we haven't looked back. I can't explain it but I wish I hadn't been so anxious about this situation. She was healthy and the situation worked itself out.

Going Back to Work

The last thing I wanted to do was to go back to work, but that was because I wasn't particularly crazy about my job at that point - plus I had essentially worked the entire time I was off - calling into the office every other day, answering phone calls, doing some chargeable work. The next time I think I'll be stronger about saying "leave me alone!". By the end of the four months, I hadn't really felt as though I'd had a relaxing time off with my daughter.

But once I got back into the swing of things at work, I felt I was doing a better job than before. Part of it was probably my desire to "prove" to my co-workers that just because I was now a single mother with time constraints, nothing was going to change. But part of it was also having more direction and focus in my personal life and this then spilled over into my work life. I may not have as many hours to spend at the office now but they are better hours, more focused and more organized. Even though I had previously been married (but without children), the partnership of me and my child has given me more direction than before, and the responsibility attached to parenting a child has made me a better employee.

Also, a very interesting phenomenon occurred which is disturbing at the same time. The bosses and co-workers seem to be much more understanding of my personal time than when I was childless. In other words, since I have a child, I have responsibilities to attend to ~ I have to leave on time and can't necessarily give up evening hours to do work. But before I was a mother, this was not the case. It is almost as though a childless person's personal time isn't viewed as being as important as a parent's personal time, which I think is completely unfair to the single, childless person.

This is definitely the most difficult thing to deal with. But finding daycare is a necessity and I decided that it was my goal (while on leave) to find someone right away. As it turned out, it took almost three months. I knew I wouldn't find someone who would care for her like her mother but I wanted a small, multi-aged group that was less like the institution that she came from. I wanted a woman who was an early childhood educator and would run a program to stimulate her. I found that person after asking around everywhere, including the swimming lesson class we attended. That is where I found my provider. I was so happy with her and arranged a number of visits so that MacLean could get used to the setting and to help ME adjust. The first month was very hard and I cried each day I left her, but I remembered that the time I spent with her would be quality - maybe not the same amount as before but it would be quality time. Remember that the time you have is precious and use every minute. Other things can wait but your child will grow and change each day and don't miss anything.

I was very torn about going back to work. I was looking forward to being challenged on an intellectual level again, to chatting with adults on a regular basis, and to receiving a real paycheck (boy, I was really looking forward to that!). But my daughter was almost

ready to take her first steps, she was saying her first words. And then there was that horrid feeling: was I abandoning her all over again?

However, as a single parent this really is an easy decision – we have to work. So, I made sure that my daycare provider was someone who I trusted implicitly. I chose in-home daycare rather than a school setting, and I knew that Bryanna would not only be cared for and stimulated, but would be loved.

Two or three days of tears (from both mom and baby) and then we each made the adjustment and settled in.

And I like my balanced life right now – good job, wonderful daughter, full life!

In two months I will be going back to work. I decided prior to leaving for China that I would resolve the day care situation quickly so that my time off would not be filled with anxiety over this important issue. I talked with lots of people in the area about day care and I visited a number of day care sites prior to travelling to China. I enrolled on some waiting lists, as well. This approach allowed me to have lots of information about day care in my mind so that when I met my daughter I could more easily decide which option suited her. Prior to going to China my first choice was a formal day care institution, but upon returning from China I decided to accept a space in a home day care in my neighbourhood. The advance footwork saved me a lot of effort and I didn't need to carry my daughter around to look at the various options. This was one of the activities that I did during the referral period.

Toddlers, Tempers, and the Terrible Twos, Threes and...

I used to long for the day when my daughter would be talking and walking and overall be more independent. What was I thinking? (*grin*)

Watch out which t.v. programs you expose them to in those first few months – your choices will come back to haunt you. Because “Elmo in Grouchland” was one of three videos that Bryanna watched constantly, I have been commanded to sing the “Elmo Song” approximately 3000 times!

Toilet training is a pain in the butt. There's a lot to be said about the benefits of diapers. I used to think that once Sophie was trained then that would be the end of that. But it doesn't end there. For almost a year after Sophie gave up diapers, whenever we would go somewhere I was acutely conscious of where the bathroom was located in case the two-minute warning was given. We've used the bathrooms in places that don't normally have them available to the general public: employee-only bathrooms in small stores, miserable Johnny-on-the-spots at outdoor events, in restaurants that we've gone into for the sole purpose of using the facilities. The only thing I haven't done yet is to knock on the door of a total stranger to ask to use the bathroom. Of course, everyone is very understanding and responsive as they look down at Sophie doing the pee-dance.

The good news about toddlers instead of babies is that they are so self-sufficient. By about age two and a half, you have a fully functional, thinking child who understands what you are saying and can even communicate back to you. And it just keeps getting more amazing as they get older. So in the darkest, bleakest early days, just remember that in no time, they'll be able to walk, feed themselves, get dressed, follow orders willingly. That old cliché about "they grow up so fast" is indeed true. But toilet training is still a pain in the butt.

*Talking about toilet-training, “Pull-ups” are great from the point of view that kids can pull them up and down themselves and can tell if they stayed dry by checking whether the “bows” on the front have disappeared. BUT they do such a great job that Bryanna doesn't know if she is wet and therefore there is no consequence if she doesn't “hold it”. It has made the start of toilet-training very easy on mom, but I think it's time to bite the bullet and switch to underwear during the day, and if accidents happen, then someone will learn a little more quickly. *grin**

Consistency is one of the most important things in a toddler's life. Bedtime, naptime, mealtime, regular routines are crucial. But not only her schedule must remain consistent. “Mom's” attitude to her behaviour must be also.

Lately, Cailin has wanted only mommy. She loves school and has never, ever cried, but suddenly she cried for over half an hour a few weeks ago in the middle of the morning. The ayi, who looks after her every day and has since I first received her, called me last week to come home early as Cailin had been crying for 2 hours non stop. This week there has been no crying, happily. I have made my time away from her very limited so that she trusts that I come home everyday at the same time etc.

Maclean is a very good, content and happy baby most of the time. But her favourite word about everything lately is "NO". It doesn't seem to matter what you say to her, the answer is "NO". You could be asking her if she wants a treat and she will always say no first and then think about what you asked. I have tried to ignore, move away, change the subject and re-direct her to say ok mommy or yes, mommy instead of always being stuck saying no. She can be very frustrating but losing your cool doesn't work. Just remember it is a stage and she is developing her personality and establishing herself as a strong, independent woman. Hooray for that but, wow, there are times when I am very frustrated. I know it will end and I think I have been okay so far. The test will be when I am away in Malaysia without support. I know I will be fine. I try to ask questions and read lots to learn new strategies and see what others are doing. I am willing to try lots of different strategies and that is what you need to do. Keep your mind open to a variety of methods.

I laughed the first time I saw her stamp her feet in anger. Generally, she is pretty easy going and until she was more than 3 years old, I hadn't witnessed any of the horrible tantrums that I'd been expecting. When she was about 2 ½ she actually started to defy me by uttering a forceful "NO" when I asked her to do something. Fortunately, that only lasted a week.

A bit of advice was given to me by friends before I became a mother have rung true with me. First was that whenever your child is going through a particular phase that's really starting to irritate, be assured that that phase will pass and a new, different, equally irritating phase will begin. Second was that it's not really the terrible twos, it's really the terrible threes and fours, because they're smarter, stronger and faster than at two. Sophie's real stubbornness didn't show its true colours until she was over age three. But like all her phases, her tantrum phase was short lived. I never figured out how to cope with them and I have no advice to offer in this regard. Sorry!

Whew. She discovered the word "no" at the age of 20 months. Oh, she knew the word before that, but exactly 4 months before her second birthday my daughter learned to revel in that word! She yelled it, she muttered it, she combined saying it with throwing things, she pushed and shoved and pulled hair. Sometimes I would have to try not to laugh, other times I left the room when I felt my own temper flare.

Two months of consistently responding with quiet words (well, most of the time!), providing more choices, leaving her to be angry on her own for a time, and letting her win some battles finally seemed to make a difference. She still uses that powerful little word, but the flaring temper tantrums have disappeared and you can see her thinking about her responses to situations.

What's next?

Toddler Adoption

I adopted my daughter at 20 months and at that age she was old enough to know what was going on when she was handed to me. She cried nonstop until she had cried herself to sleep several hours later. But I was still there when she woke up and it didn't take her long to realize that I was always going to be there. One week later she was calling me 'mama'.

There are pluses and minuses to adopting a toddler but I found the minuses to be pretty minor compared to some of the pluses. It was easier to find daycare for her since I didn't need an infant spot. She did have nightmares for months, which I think was because she was more aware of the big change in her life. But I only had to deal with a crib for four months (then she took a header out of her crib) and diapers for ten months. She was verbal and able to tell me why she was sad, hungry, angry or happy in months rather than years. I missed her first teeth but on the plus side I missed most of her teething. I saw her crawl for the first time and I saw her first steps, which quickly became running. I have watched her joy at so many 'firsts' that I don't feel like I missed much and it feels like she has always been a part of me.

Most important of all I think is that she was calling me 'mama' while we were still in China. The experience of adopting a toddler was so positive for me that if I adopt again, next time I will request a toddler.

Travelling Alone with A Small Child

I believe Maclean is easy going because she joined my life and we continued to carry on as best as we could. She is very portable and has done a lot of traveling in her young life and even has an Airmiles card. That is a child who just goes where I go and feels safe and that is the important thing.

Cailin and I have traveled to and from North America now for 2 years. The key to successful travelling with a child is to be organized, organized, organized! When she was an infant, I would prepare all of her formula and food before we left in the small liner bags, some with just milk powder and some with milk and cereal all neatly labeled. This made it easy to just hand the bottle to the flight attendant for adding water and it also helped with cleanup – very hard to clean a bottle in those tiny bathrooms holding a squirmy baby. I usually would bring two bottles; one for milk and one for watered down juice from the plane. I made a point of feeding Cailin small amounts frequently so she would be well hydrated during the flights. Cailin never suffered any ear pain, however - I always made sure that she was ready for a bottle on take-off and landings. Take-off is without a doubt the more difficult one to gage, as you have to have the bottle ready from the flight attendants quite early but the plane can taxi and sit and wait forever it seems. I'm not sure I have ever timed one of the take-offs properly. I would also bring cut up cheese, cheerios, fruit to go, bagels and some pre-sliced fruit such as pears or apples. The only food you receive for the baby from Air Canada is the cold jars of baby food and Cailin would not touch them.

In terms of clothing I would bring 3 to 4 different outfits for your child. In general, I would take zip-up pajamas (forget buttons and snaps!) or sweat suit type clothes to ensure that Cailin was covered at all times as the planes can be cool. I also brought her slippers as the plane floor is too dirty to have her just go in socks (not that this has stopped her from crawling on every plane floor we have been on). I placed a diaper, change of clothes and wipes all in a zip lock bag so that I could just grab the bag when she needed a clothing change. The advantage to the zip lock bag is that you then have a place to place dirty, wet clothes and it doesn't get on anything else. I also had diapers and wipes separate so when her entire outfit did not need to be changed I didn't need to bother with the other stuff. I usually brought enough diapers to change her approximately every two hours (approximately 14 diapers) – not that I changed her this frequently however, it's nice to have the option. Cailin often suffers from a diaper rash on long flights so it is important to change her diapers frequently. Just a note, I have been delayed now twice over 24 hours and Air Canada customer service department does have extra diapers if you run into this problem.

For myself I usually would bring one extra t-shirt and make sure I wore something that didn't show the spills etc. When I first took Cailin home she was prone to throwing up after every bottle, at that time I went so far as to wear rain/wind pants as they were comfortable and washed up easily.

Toys and baby entertainment are well worth the effort and space. Cailin loved small toys that moved and made (quiet) noise. She also loved books and stickers (hours of fun

here). Personally, I take nothing for myself except my camera, a toothbrush, my glasses and contact case, a thick pair of socks and the extra t-shirt. When she sleeps I sleep and when she's awake I'm the entertainment source so there is no time for books or magazines any longer.

For those crossing borders frequently or who are in places where there are long line-ups, a lollipop works wonders. It's a rare occurrence in our household however it does the trick here when the crying from frustration and exhaustion begins. I find it so cruel to have to strap Cailin into a stroller after a 10+ hour journey just to have her wait in long lineups but one must do what one must do!

The other area I find difficult being a single parent is traveling! I travel about 5 times a year and generally long distances - I find it stressful and truly one of the more difficult times. In general, though, the trip goes well however I do stress about it a lot before hand. Now with all of the new airline security (don't get me wrong, I am in favour of the added security!) my stress level has doubled! We just came back from Malaysia and the wait in line for the metal detector was over an hour. I cannot even imagine it at Christmas when I will be heading to Canada and likely have two children.

What Is the Best Way to Recover from Jetlag?

There are many opinions on this subject, however I subscribe to the one that says to do it as quickly as possible. I have found what works best for us is to limit Cailin's day naps to no longer than about two hours. The first few days I have to force her to wake up from her nap (and yes I feel awful) but it's worth it in the end. During the nights she will wake up ready to play however I do not turn on any lights, I don't change her unless absolutely necessary and I let her play by herself with small toys on the bed or I put on a music video (Baby Mozart is a great one for this). I try very hard not to speak to Cailin and if I do it's just a whisper. After about an hour and a half I give her a bottle and lie her down with me. The first night she usually wakes twice, the second night once, the third and fourth nights she will only wake for a bottle and the fifth night she sleeps through. Jetlag takes us about 4 days to get over and it takes me about that long to unpack! Leave the suitcases, they aren't going anywhere and get your rest when your child is asleep.

Telling Your Daughter About China

Unlike with domestic or eastern European adoption, you cannot hide the fact that your Chinese child is adopted. We have to talk about it with our children so that they understand their origins before they start to be questioned about it. This can happen as early as 3 so it helps to practice while your child is too young to ask many questions and you can work out the bugs in your story. I started by taking my child through the photo albums of the trip to China and talking about the trip when I went to 'get' her. Gradually I started using more formal language and at about three I started using the words 'adopt' and 'orphanage'. I was uncomfortable talking about my daughter's birth parents so I struggled with variations of a story until I found one I could talk about easily that did not deal with abandonment. Most nights for over a year my daughter listened quietly to her 'China story' until one night when she was four she started asking questions. Why couldn't they look after her. Where was the orphanage. Why did I go to China. A flood of questions had been inside her for who knows how long. Luckily, I had been telling her the story and thinking of it for so long that I could answer her questions comfortably. Then we found the book "I Love You Like Crazy Cakes" and that became our nightly routine as it tells our family story and gives her room to ask questions without it necessarily being about her.

So my advice is to practice your story till you feel comfortable, gradually adding more complexity as your child gets older. Use books that are out there, such as "I Love You Like Crazy Cakes" or "When You Were Born in China". Some people make their own story books with travel photos and simple text. Keep an open dialogue and don't wait for questions because your child needs to know that you're not afraid to talk about what are sometimes painful questions.

At an early age, she knew that she was from China, but she also knew her friend Anne was from Montreal, so I could have told her I'm from the moon and it wouldn't have meant anything to her. Countries and cities were difficult concepts to grasp. Now that she's a bit older (3 1/2), she is interested in where people live so its starting to sink in. She points out Chinese people, Chinese characters, and knows which of her books are Chinese and which aren't. She knows that Chinese girls have black hair and black eyes, but interestingly she doesn't think she is Chinese, even though she knows that she was born in China. The best educational experience has been for the parents of a close daycare buddy (who was also adopted from China) to go to China to meet their second daughter. We talked about where Sarah's parents were and why they were there and we met Sarah's new sister at the airport. She also knows that she's going to have a baby sister one day and that we'll go to China together to get her. But I have only occasionally used words like "adoption", "birth mother", and "orphanage". But I also know that the hard questions are just around the corner, and I'm hoping to be as honest as I can even though it's probably going to be tough at times.

One of Bryanna's first words was "China" and she knew that that was the response to the question, "Where did Bryanna come from?". She didn't understand what that really meant, of course, but that was the beginning of "our" story.

Before she could speak, I would tell her how mommy flew in a big plane all the way to China to find my little girl and bring her home. Now that her comprehension is expanding daily along with the ability to express herself, we talk about our story whenever we look at the China photo album or videos. I use words like adoption, and forever family day, and birth mother and orphanage. She doesn't understand them all, but when she can, then they will already be familiar parts of our discussions.

I often wonder what questions the next five years will bring. Hopefully, we'll both be ready!

Yes, I'm A Single Parent

Most couples assume that my life must be really tough and they admire me for doing this on my own. My typical response is that I have many friends who are single parents, and not necessarily by choice, plus they are dealing with the additional stress of the former spouse. I think it's all about what you're prepared for psychologically and in the case of a "single parent by choice" you know that you will be the primary caregiver and you just do what you have to do. Now, I haven't had that many challenges yet and I'm sure they will come, but so far it has not been as tough as I thought it would be.

The four things that are the toughest about (single) parenthood:

1. Sophie's whining (but I understand that can go on until adulthood).
2. Sophie wanting me to carry her all the time ("I'm too busy to walk").
3. Not having been organized enough to find a regular babysitter, especially in the first year and a half.
4. Unsolicited advice from other parents (the key being "unsolicited"); for some reason, this seemed to happen to me a lot in the early days, but not so much now; advice about what she was eating, how she was eating, what kind of shoes were best to learn to walk etc etc, but my favourite from older people is "my child was toilet trained at a year!" (Do you think I'm obsessing about the toilet training thing?)

The four things that are the best:

1. When she hugs me at the end of Barney when he sings that stupid "I love you" song.
2. First thing in the morning when she wakes up, pats my cheek, and says "Hi Mommy".
3. When I pick her up from daycare at the end of the day and she is so excited and wants to show me what she made that day.
4. When I see her do something that I didn't think she knew how to do, like making a string of small beads, or colouring within the lines, or attempting to write her name, or when she says words or uses phrases that I didn't know she knew, or when she knows all the words in her books and "reads" along with me.

All of these are the wonderful things about being a single parent – and while I have all the financial and emotional responsibility, I don't have to share her with anyone!

Sometimes when people look, stare, etc. I kind of chuckle to myself because I am waiting to see if they say anything. Most people ask if my husband is Chinese and I say no and then the looks continue and they look even more perplexed. Once I leave them hanging for a minute or two, I tell them that she is my daughter and I adopted her from China. OH, they say. Maclean has also started to ask about daddy. I know that someday I will tell her about her birth parents, but for now I explain to her as best I can

that there are many different families. Some have mommies, daddies and some have nanas and papas and our family has MacLean and mama. She says okay and then asks me "where my daddy gone?" I continue to explain the scenario over and over again.

Recently, someone asked her where her daddy was and she looked at me and said "I have just a mama and I lub you mama". My heart melted and I felt like a million bucks. What else could anyone ask for.

I feel like my story has been TOO easy and I don't want to paint an unreasonably favourable picture of single parenthood. But maybe that's all part of doing this at age 40 - I'm more confident about what I can and can't do, about what's important and what's not important and I'm not expecting to be a super-mom since I have nothing to prove to anyone.

Being a single mom means drawing from the resources around you. Friends and family especially become your source of support, strength and guidance and the ones you turn to for help and a break. I use my parents and family to bounce ideas off of, and it is totally ok to say you need help and a break. MacLean is very comfortable with my family and I know that there will be times when she is older and wants to go over to my parents and I look forward to that day. It makes me feel good that she is so comfortable. What a great thing to have in my life. Family and friends are more valuable than anything else so keep the ties strong.

Many married people have said that they can't understand how I manage on my own. I've thought a lot about that because I understand now how having a partner would make things so much easier.

However, when you're a single parent you just figure out what you CAN do, and all the other less important things in life get tossed aside. You don't beat yourself up if the housework doesn't get done as regularly as it used to, or if your paperwork piles up on a desk, or the garden is a mass of weeds.

You do what's possible. You look for support when you need it.

You just love your child. That makes it all seem easy.

Sophie's friends seem far more concerned than Sophie about the fact that she doesn't have a father. At a crucial moment at a birthday party, one child asked "Where's Sophie's daddy?" and other kids chimed in with the same question. I wanted to melt into the floor, but Sophie, much better adjusted, simply piped in "I just have a mommy" and went back to eating cake. For her, she has a grandfather, but not a grandmother, and she has a mother, but no father. That's just how it is.

Adopting For a Second (or Third!) Time

I only ever expected to adopt one child. I wanted us to be able to travel and for her to have all the things in life that I wanted for her. I have known several friends who have only one child (some married, some not) and they all seem to have a very special, close relationship with their one child and that's what I wanted for Sophie and me. Plus I live in a very small house in a neighbourhood that I love. Much to my surprise, shortly after I returned home I started thinking vaguely about adopting again. The reasons were ones that I hadn't really thought about much before adopting the first time: like many who adopt internationally, I'm not a spring chicken so I'll be an older parent and I didn't really want to place the burden of my old age on one daughter alone. Plus, more importantly, my own sister is one of my best friends and I value the relationship with her so much that I want Sophie to have that same opportunity. And so, once we were settled in and after I was back at work for a while, it started to seem possible both financially and emotionally. I decided that, somehow, we'll still travel and do and see all those things that I want my daughters to do and see. And we'll just make do in my small house – it'll be cramped with the three of us, but we'll survive.

But I'm not crazy – I've read and talked to many single people about secrets for success and one of them seems to be a relatively large age gap between the two children. There will be about a three-year age gap between Sophie and her sister. Close enough that they can still have a close adult relationship – my sister and I are six years apart in age and as adults, it doesn't matter. But far enough apart that Sophie will be starting junior kindergarten (and hence lower daycare costs) once her sister arrives.

Now that we're waiting for daughter and sister, I know I've made the right choice for all of us. I just hope that when I get home from this one, I don't start thinking about #3!

I do think most days that I have lost my mind doing the second adoption, even my mother some days wondered if I had lost all of my marbles when I made this decision..... at the same time, though, she thinks it is a wonderful idea. Everyone agrees it will be the best thing for Cailin, and of course the other child and me! I know the beginning will be tough but as they grow older it will be fine, and toddler-hood is just a short time in all reality. Many people have asked, why not just have my own - I have said that that's not what it's about. I want Cailin to have some connection to others of her race and with a similar background. I want her to have someone to turn to who will understand her issues and vice versa.

I've adopted by choice and I think it's important to make that distinction sometimes, so the children know how truly wanted they were. I have asked for the same orphanage and similar age range again so I can say I tried to make things fair, not that life is fair by any means. I think if you have the capacity you absolutely should do it. I think having a sibling can teach a child so much, and offer them so much, that we as adults can't. Just my two cents!

What I Wish I'd Known...

(Thanks to mom-to-be "Shirley" for posing these questions!)

What one thing about babies had you wished you had known on the day you were handed your baby?

Hmm. Tough one. Bryanna cried all day and was quite ill, and by the end of the day I was so stressed that I threw up in the bathroom. So, I guess, for me, it would be that babies will feel better eventually and that EVERYTHING will pass. By Day 3 Bryanna was happy and smiling and her cold medications and skin cream had performed miracles.

I wished I'd spent more time around babies. I knew nothing at all – had hardly ever changed a diaper. Didn't know how or what to feed a baby. So that was probably my biggest stress up front. I starved poor Sophie for the first day because she wouldn't eat formula and I couldn't figure out what she wanted until the next day. When I look back, it's an amazing thing that we don't all crack up under the stress of being handed a 10 or 12 month old baby that already has a certain routine and eats certain things in a certain way, but we don't know what those are and nobody tells us.

I did not have a clue how and what to feed her and wished I knew more about the feeding part. So, if there is a daughter number #2 in the plans it will be easier having this experience under my belt.

I wished then and still do that I could have had a play-by-play video account of one day of Abbey's life in her orphanage. It would have explained and clarified so many things about her and why she does the things she does. Especially in the beginning before I knew her well, this would have stopped a lot of guessing.

In what way was your travelling partner a help to you? Or not?

Oh wow. I took THREE people (parents and sister) and while others have managed on their own, I sure couldn't. They watched the baby while I showered or filled out paperwork. When I came down with the cold that everyone was getting, they took Bryanna on a two hour shopping trip while I huddled in bed (I recovered really quickly). My mother was a huge emotional support since I was a first-time mom, and my parents actually became "honourary grandparents" for the whole group and helped out lots of the other families, too. And it was SO great having my family carry the bags and stroller and other paraphernalia while I held Bryanna. I may take this many people with me again when I go back for number two!

I traveled with my father and his wife. She (now his ex-wife) was great. Pops was great too, except he was always "stealing" Sophie away from me - and I was concerned about the whole bonding thing and wanted to make sure she wasn't confused and understood who her mom was. But I was worrying needlessly - by the end of the two weeks she was turning to me and had it figured out pretty quickly. But during the trip, it worried me. Otherwise, it was great to have extra hands to hold Sophie, especially in the early days when there's lots of sitting around and paperwork to complete.

I had two girlfriends with me. One is a mom and the other is Serena's Godmother. They helped me a lot with luggage, the snuggly, holding Serena while I did paperwork etc. And what was really wonderful was that one of my girlfriends brought her video camera. So we have a lot of the trip on tape.

My travelling companion was an unbelievable help, I couldn't have done it without her. She spelled me off when I needed to do official business and group leader stuff. Most importantly I got a long bath each day... something that doesn't always happen now that we are on our own.

My father traveled with me. We stayed in separate rooms which worked well - as he could get a good night's rest and I could hand him Samantha before breakfast so that I could take a quick shower. Because he was there, there was always someone with Samantha (ie, getting up to get food from the buffet table was never an issue). He was also incredible in assisting me with camera bags and diaper bags. He was also a blessing to have with me when Samantha and I were united, as he was able to take a bunch of photos for me of the two of us (I had someone else in our group videotape this - as they had received their daughter the night before). I would highly recommend taking at least one person with you - they really can be a blessing. My Dad was fantastic!

As I live in Beijing I did not travel with anyone. I was very worried about being "stuck" in Beijing while I did paperwork with a new baby and no friends around as everyone had left on summer holidays. I worried about this for ages but in the end it was a great 3 weeks with just Cailin and me. The days just flew by and I didn't miss not having others around. It really gave me an opportunity to bond with Cailin and to get to know her very well. When I arrived home in Canada, I was ready to "share" her with friends and relatives and I was not worried about her ability to handle so many people as I felt I knew her quite well by then.

What would you do differently on your trip if you did it again?

The one big regret was that I didn't go to Sophie's home town. It was only about 50 km outside the provincial capital and we could have taken a cab there, I'm sure. We weren't invited to the orphanage but I would have liked to have just spent a couple of hours wandering around the city. For Baby #2, I've asked for the same orphanage so if we even end up in the same province, I'll make sure I go to her home town.

Otherwise, I'm not sure I would have done anything differently. Maybe done more shopping. *grin*

More shopping!

We had a fantastic trip, there are very few things I would do differently however, I would choose not to be group leader a second time. This was a great opportunity and I'm glad I did it but a second time around I would like to sit back and let someone else handle the logistics.

What have you learned about yourself since becoming a parent?

I'm a lot more patient than I thought I was. Also, I can worry with the best of them!

I'm not sure I've learned too many things but have had lots of things confirmed. For example, I suspected I wouldn't be much of an authoritarian and that's probably true, much to the chagrin of some of my parent-dictator friends. I also figured I'd buy Sophie too much stuff, which I do. A better question might be "what has been your biggest surprise about becoming a parent" and my answer there would be that I've been surprised by how quickly they become fully functioning little human beings (especially when they start out at 10 or 12 months with us) and how much there is to learn from them. It's hard to explain what I mean by that, but I've just been constantly surprised by how Sophie makes her emotional and physical needs known to me.

Two key pieces of advice were given to me before I was a parent and I keep thinking back to these and found them to be very true. First, a good routine is very important in the early years (i.e. sleeping, eating etc). Second, various behavioural phases are just that: phases. When your child is doing something that really starts to bug you, the child grows out of it and starts doing something else to bug you in a different way.

I found that I am more patient than I thought I would be. Also, being a deep sleeper I was worried that I wouldn't hear her cries throughout the night. No problem; she's loud.

I have learned that your heart can in fact grow three times larger, that I enjoy nothing more than hearing my baby laugh and that there is nothing in life that is more important. My daughter has grounded me, given me purpose and given me direction, three things that I wasn't even aware that I lacked in my life.

That there is an incredible amount of joy in the world once one of these little darlings enters your life! I have never been happier (and I was never one to pine for a child - I just felt the time was right when this whole process began). I truly had no conception of the bliss I would experience at becoming a Mom to Samantha. She is such a blessing in my life.

What has been the hardest thing about going from being on your own to being a single parent? What do you miss about being on your own?

The hardest adjustment was no more sleeping in. Seriously. I have not slept in later than 7:00 (and I used to revel in this on weekends!) more than two times (when I went on vacation) in almost two years. Also, learning that you can't run out the door at a moment's notice anymore. However, I have adjusted to both those things now.

The toughest thing for me was to find a baby sitter. I'd gladly have dragged Sophie around anywhere with me, but there are just times that doesn't work. So for the longest while I didn't do "adult" stuff because I didn't have a regular babysitter to call on. But I've since found one (who works at Sophie's daycare) and it's working out really well (other than the cost). Because, like a lot of us who are a bit long in the tooth when we become parents, I'd sort of "been there, done that" with a lot of things and was ready for parenthood. Weirdly, the one thing I was missing was not being able to go to as many theatre events as I used to or taking night school courses, but that was all tied up with the lack of babysitting. But now its working out nicely and I seem to be able to fit in everything that I want to do.

I too, did not have a babysitter. Currently, my tenant will pop upstairs if I have to run out to the store. Right now the hardest thing is time management. I am back to work full-time (prematurely) and I cannot seem to keep the house or my paperwork in order. That makes me a little crazy. Sleeping past 7:00 has been history since March. Serena did not sleep through the night until the beginning of September. I didn't think I would make it through this stage.

I guess I have an active imagination but I actually thought it would be much harder to be a parent than it really is. Parenthood has been a natural extension of where I want to

be, so I have to say that it hasn't been hard at all. We'll see how I feel once I'm back at work.

I have also NEVER been a morning person - and it is weird to see me typing this, since I have found that I now go to bed a wee bit earlier than I used to and wake up around 6:30 - on a non-workday - and wake with a smile as I hear my sweetie cooing and entertaining herself in the next room. The early hours are not as gruesome as I imagined they might be.

As for freedoms of yesterday.... You are not as free to run out and do errands or visit with friends as you once had been (I find this has a lot to do with current nap requirements (Samantha's - Not mine!!! *grin*). And as the baby gets more active, there is not as much time available to chat on the phone as you once had. But, in the grand scheme of things... who cares. These little ones grow up so fast. I want to enjoy every second of this experience as much as I can (this is what is killing me about going back to work – I get so little time with Samantha during the week).

The other issue is that there are times when you are so tired (or sick) that it would be so nice to have someone available to spell you for a couple of hours, so that you can have a nap yourself, but without a partner, this isn't always possible. Unfortunately, for me, my parents live a long way away, so on the few days I've had like this, it would have been nice to have them nearer. I find I am not comfortable imposing on friends, as they all have busy lives of their own.

I don't miss much as before I adopted I was pretty satisfied with all that I had done. I did an Outward Bound course, worked with Habitat for Humanity in Alaska, lived in different countries and saw places and people that I had dreamed of seeing. When I came to China I had to wait 2 years in order to be eligible to adopt (that regulation has since changed) so I spent the time traveling in Asia and seeing this part of the world. So far I can truly say I miss nothing about not being single.

Some of the hardest times for me as a single parent have been when Cailin was sick or injured. I tell myself, though, that every situation is different and of course we always manage and make the best of the situation.

I really miss taking my dog for long hikes in the woods.

Thinking back to the waiting time, what would have helped you to prepare better for baby?

Nothing, I don't think. I had done everything possible – decorated the house, bought clothes and supplies, taken care of wills and official stuff and read books about China and Parenting until my mind was ready to explode.

I was still painting Serena's bedroom the weekend before we left for China. I bought a house a year ago and it needed a lot of work. I wished I had worked on her room first!! I would have planned to have my mother (she lives in Manitoba) to stay a MONTH not two weeks!!

Like everyone else has said, there is really no way to prepare, the only thing I can think of is perhaps getting a good baby cookbook. I still have trouble thinking up interesting and healthy meals for my picky eater.

Absolutely nothing. I went to all the CB events I could. I talked to friends and family and met other families who had adopted or were also in the process. As I have had lots of experience with babies in general, I didn't do a lot of reading on baby care. It's interesting, though. Once you have your own baby, at least this has been my finding, you are alert to so much more - their nuances, their health, their body rhythms, their schedules. The baby info books come in handy once you're home - to see if your baby is reaching the right mile-stones. What you can do for whatever it is you are facing, etc.

And it's also wonderful to start building your support network while you wait. I have made some absolutely wonderful friends through this experience, both through CB and outside of this network. Your CB connections are an incredible source of support. When I had some stressful times, just before going over to China, I was able to call on fellow CBers for support - And they were there for me in a big way! (If you didn't know, many are angels in disguise!)

Before you adopted, did you have dreams or an idea about how life would be when you were a parent? Is that idea anything like reality now?

I tried not to have "dreams" or expectations, because I figured that no matter what I thought, it would be nothing like what reality would turn out to be. However, I did think I would be overwhelmed with love at the first moment, and that did take longer than expected. I was excited and delighted and happy, but the deep love of mother to child took a while to develop for me. I had heard that that could be the case, but it caused me some worry in the first few months.

Fortunately, I think it's exactly as I pictured it to be.

No, I did not have dreams or an idea of how life would be being a parent. However, I thought I would be more laid back, a "cool mom", but I am a "worry-wart" mom! The reality part is that it is ten times more work than I had imagined but it is 100 times more rewarding. Another reality is that I did not know how deep a mother/child bond could go. The oddest thing is that I feel my bond clicked in place (if there were any doubts at all they were completely erased) the day of the terrorist attack.

Nope. I just knew I was doing the right thing. And couldn't wait until I could know who my daughter was going to be (referral) and then to be holding her in my arms! I also knew I wanted to move into a house (which I've now done).

You will hear many tell you that they have the perfect child for them. And despite the weirdness of that statement... it is so true! I can't imagine a more perfect match for me than Samantha. And when I see the other single and dual parent families, I can't imagine them with anyone other than their daughters. It's uncanny!

I am a day dreamer from way back. Parenthood is everything I dreamed and so much more. Even in my wildest dreams I never imagined the kind of love I have for my child.