

INTERCOUNTRY No. 50 (issued on 03/15/2016)

ISSJ News

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Assistance with Parent-Child Visitation or Contact after Divorce and Separation



ISSJ provides assistance with parent-child visitation or contact in international divorce cases. We liaise between the both parents for the purposes of working out the details of visitation. At least one ISSJ social worker attends all visitations so arranged.

Parent-child visitation or contact is necessary to allow the child to spend time with both parents. Details of child support, including the manner, schedule, and frequency of visitation or contact, are established through discussion between parents and filing a petition for conciliation or adjudication with the family court. However, many couples in a divorce proceeding have difficulty discussing child visitation or contact on their own. In such instances, we work closely with both parents and the child to understand their respective intentions and wishes so as to minimize the emotional burden placed on the child caused by the divorce and separation of his/her parents and to ensure ongoing visitation and contact with both parents which, we believe, is critical for the healthy development of the child.

ISSJ's Assistance with Parent-Child Visitation or Contact

The 1980 Hague Convention (*The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction*) prescribes international cooperative scheme to protect children wrongfully taken in breach of custodial arrangement or agreement across international borders after a divorce and separation. ISSJ is a Visitation or Contact Supporting Institution commissioned by the Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In recent months, ISSJ has been experiencing increased demand for its services due to increased referral of cases where other private agencies and Supporting Institutions cannot provide support because of limitations in their geographic or service capacity. We are also seeing an increase in the number of inquiries relating to international

divorce cases that are not covered by the 1980 Hague Convention for failure to satisfy all its qualifying conditions.

How Parent-Child Visitation or Contact Works

Once ISSJ receives an application for its assistance, an assigned ISSJ social worker works with both parents to reach agreement on the date and the method of child visitation or contact. Where one parent does not want to disclose his/her present address to the other parent, or where the parent and the child cannot decide the location for visitation or contact, the ISSJ social worker will offer suggestions.

The ISSJ social worker is present at all arranged visitations in order to provide support for the child to feel at ease. In particular, at first visitation, both the parent and the child often feel nervous and find it difficult to talk to each other, in which case the social worker can help them start a conversation. In international divorce cases, the language barrier and cultural differences often pose additional difficulties for the parent and the child to communicate with each other. In such cases, the ISSJ social worker acts as a translator and provides supplementary explanation when the child cannot explain something in detail. After the visitation, the social worker follows up with both parents about the child's reaction to the visitation.

We aim to ensure that the child feels relaxed during visitation or contact with the parent



Even when a child does not verbally express his/her feelings, visitation or contact with a parent (s)he does not usually live with affects the child in many ways. In providing visitation or contact assistance, we ask both parents up front to do their best to make the visitation as relaxed and stress-free as possible. To that end, we make our own preparations to ensure that the child feels comfortable during visitation while respecting the intentions of both parents. We will continue to spend time and effort on each visitation or contact case so that we can provide individualized support that is tailored to meet each family's unique situation and needs.

The 1980 Hague Convention

The 1980 Hague Convention refers to a multilateral treaty concluded at the Hague Conference on Private International Law in Hague, the Netherlands. The *Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction** was developed in 1980 to protect children from harmful effects of their parents' divorce, separation, abduction and retention across international borders. Japan signed onto the Convention in 2014 and became subject to its terms starting April 1st of that year. As of January 2016, 93 countries have ratified the Hague Convention.

International Child Abduction

International child abduction refers to a wrongful taking of a child from his/her habitual residence by one parent without the other parent's agreement as well as situations where a child is not returned to his/her habitual residence by one parent following a temporary visitation arranged with the other parent's permission.

Feature Article Message to Adoptive Parents

Interview with Ms. Sahel Rosa

Ms. Sahel Rosa, an actress appearing on TV, radio, stage and movie screen, talked to us about social problems concerning home-based child-nurturing drawn from her own childhood experience in an orphanage before being raised by her adoptive mother.

ISSJ is committed to providing children with an opportunity to be nurtured at home through adoption. In this interview, Ms. Sahel Rosa shared her thoughts and message to adoptive parents as someone who was raised as an adopted child.



***You are actively involved in child welfare causes in addition to your professional work in different fields. How do you keep your balance?**

By nature, I am generally reserved with strangers so I tend not to talk about personal matters in public. However, through my work in the media, many people have come to learn about my background and I have noticed that more and more people are becoming aware of the child welfare issue, which is very close to my heart and which I have always wanted to raise public awareness on. Also, children placed at institutions

that I visit often tell me “I saw you on TV. That was so cool.” Seeing someone like me who was brought up in the same environment as themselves might help them start believing that they can also make their dreams come true. I hope that I can send a positive message to these children that overcoming the difficulties they now face will help them move on to the next stage of their lives.

***Do you have anything special you want to do in future?**

I want to build “Sahel’s Home”, not an institution but a real home where children can look forward to coming back to after school. I want to take care of them as their parent. I spent three years at an institution before being adopted so I understand their despair and loneliness. But, I cannot become their parent right away. I need time and money to support them so now I am focusing on making preparations for that.

***You seem to be deeply dedicated to social welfare work”**

I want to promote public awareness on the issue of child welfare by getting people involved in my work. While I’ve never asked for donations outright, I would like to make it easier for people to take their next step once they become aware of these social welfare issues.

My work as a performing artist on radio and stage allows me to express my vulnerabilities and feelings. However, it is not easy for children placed at institutions to express what they are feeling. While institutionalized as a child, I craved affection and could not share those feelings with anyone. I was constantly asking myself whether I was good enough to be loved by anyone or whether I was allowed to be happy. I don’t know if I was different from others, but I know that children placed at institutions harbor deep insecurities and dark thoughts. Perhaps everybody has an “inner child” but I believe our “inner child” is stronger than that of those brought up in a traditional home. I believe it is important to be nurtured at home from childhood because our inner child needs constant nurturing even when one is much loved by parents at home. I am not criticizing the institutions. People at institutions work very hard to develop one-on-one relationships with the children they look after, but are hampered by the workload caused by limited number of staff. In a traditional home, parents teach their child things s/he can or cannot do and discipline them when needed. In an institution, there are some children whose pent-up feelings sometimes turn into violent thoughts or acts. During my visits, some children hit me, which might look like rude manners or violence to others. I think they are basically seeking attention and affection but just do not know how to express their complicated feelings.

***There can be conflict between adoptive parents and children**

I myself experienced such conflict. People around me thought that my adoptive mother was treating me harshly and I was almost sent back to the institution. In fact, my adoptive mother was trying hard to raise me as a single parent but raising a child from 7-8 years of age is entirely different from raising a child from infancy, and I quarreled with her constantly. I was initially happy having my own family but later on, I started to miss my friends at the institution, so I said to her, "I don't want to be here, I don't like you". I could not understand her feelings. It was very inconsiderate of me.

The Importance of Child-Nurturing in a Home.

***How do you think we can raise awareness about the importance of child-nurturing in a home?**

I think that it is necessary to get people become familiar with children placed at institutions. We can start by providing people with opportunities to interact with these children. At first, people don't know how to get involved so they tend to keep distance for fear of taking chances with what is unfamiliar. But the most important thing for people to realize is that the children placed at institutions are just children, the same human beings as any other but they are just not blessed with a family. They are neither uncivilized nor violent but they are simply signaling their desire to be understood and loved. I think it is important to be aware of such things.

As children placed at institutions become older, they not only have to work part time in order to earn their tuition to attend a vocational college, but lack guarantors who are often necessary to start living independently, and many of them don't even know how to pay utility fees so that someone has to teach those things one by one.

***Japanese people seem resistant to opening up to non-blood relations.**

Ultimately, it boils down to learning how to be with each other and live together as family. Some institutionalized children may do things children brought up at home may not do, such as hiding food or telling lies. This is a form of self-defense they have adopted in order to survive at an institution. It is important to understand this and provide guidance in changing these behaviors with care, patience, and affection. After adopting me, I know that my adopted mother did everything she could for me. I now want to show her my gratitude for all that she has done to raise and protect me till now.

Finding One's Roots

***It is often very difficult for adoptive parents to tell their adopted children that they**

are not blood relations. Did you know you were adopted from the start?

Adopted children can somehow sense the situation in which they are placed. Children brought up at institutions develop deep emotional insights and mental maturity although they may just look like children. I was explicitly told about my adoption and was shown documents to prove it. I already knew that I was adopted but still felt pain in my heart. My adoptive mother also suffered emotionally. Adoptive parents are often afraid that the adopted children would go back to their birth parents if they could be found.

***ISSJ receives many inquiries on how to find adoptees' roots. What does "finding your roots" mean to you?**

I feel that there is certain emptiness in my heart that I am seeking to fill. I don't even know which town I was born or raised in. I could talk with my adoptive mother, who is also from Iran, but I am not sure whether I should even look for my past that I have no memories of and whether I might be better off not knowing certain things. Two years ago, I had an occasion to visit Iran twice for my work and met my adoptive mother's family, who welcomed and took care of me as their grandchild.

***Did your trip to Iran change how you feel about finding your roots?**

The visit to Iran gave me valuable peace of mind and filled some of the emptiness in my heart. I am grateful to so many people who supported me through this process.

***How have you tried to build a relationship with your adoptive mother over the years?**

I expressed my gratitude to my adoptive mother for the first time when I was finishing up the third year of junior high school. Up to that point, I held many resentments towards her for not understanding me sufficiently and not spending enough time with me at home although I knew that she was busy working. I failed to notice that she was doing her best. Now, I have to be reminded that my adoptive mother and I are not related by blood. I have grown up to look like her in appearance and we have the same tastes in food. It's quite mysterious.

Message to Adoptive Parents

***Do you have any message for adoptive parents?**

I would advise the adoptive parents to work less hard and not pretend to be strong all time. My own adoptive mother was always smiling after she adopted me. I know she faced many difficulties that made her want to cry but she never showed her weakness to me so that I thought she was a strong woman. But I found her crying when I was in

the third year of junior high school and realized for the first time how much she was struggling as a single parent raising an adoptive child on her own.

Adoptive parents try very hard to be understanding of their adopted children from the start, but when the relationship does not develop smoothly, the adoptive parents have a very difficult time. In such times, I think it might be best for the adoptive parents to tell the adoptees honestly about how they feel, even if they are sad or miserable. They do not have to be in a rush to become parents until the children are ready to accept them as their parents. In the beginning, the most important thing for the adoptive parents is to pay close attention to the children and be available to listen to what they have to say. It's impossible to become their parents in a short time especially when the adoptees did not choose their adoptive parents. I also think it's not simply a matter of adoptees "liking" their adoptive parents, but it's more about the children wanting to become a member of the adoptive parents' family.

How important is it for the adoptive parents to be patient with the adoptees?

Adoptive children's hearts cannot be forced to open. They need to be given time and space to develop genuine feelings of trust and family over time.

I know that ISSJ has extensive experience in providing various social welfare services to a large number of people facing all kinds of difficulties. I hope we will be able to learn from ISSJ the societal realities of the child welfare system, including areas in need of improvement.

After the Interview

We were deeply moved by Ms. Sahel Rosa's commitment to promote public awareness on child welfare while pursuing a demanding career as a performing artist. We felt that precious children's thoughts and feelings could be heard through her message, which we will use as an inspiration to continue our work to the best of our ability.

Date of Interview: February 12, 2016