



# The One and Only Ivan

Movie Review

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As far back as ancient Greece people were utilizing books as methods for working through various ailments. The term, bibliography, is what we pair with the phenomenon of using media, specifically books, to help people suffering from trauma or psychological issues. While the Transfiguring Adoption is NOT claiming to be professionals in the psychological or mental health arena, we do believe that families can glean from this concept in using movies, video games, and, naturally, books, to help foster or adoptive children process their story.

## Section I

### Why are we using books, movies, and video games to help children?

- **Partially disengage mind from fear/problems**  
Immersing yourself in media helps you to escape from reality for a bit. This can give our minds a partial break from the worry and stress so that we have more energy to attach the issue when we come back to it.
- **Introduced to new solutions**  
We might discover new solutions to problems as we experience a character in media conquer an issue.
- **Emotional vocabulary**  
Discovering more ways to express how we feel and think can help us to communicate our own thoughts and feelings. Overall, more effective communication allows us to ask for better assistance with our feelings and issues.
- **Identify with characters/stories**  
You have heard the saying, “no man is an island.” No person wants to feel like they are alone in their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. When we discover a character in media struggling with similar issues as our own, it helps to “normalize,” our life situations and feel comforted. This can also help us to discover our own identity as a character goes through a process in their life.

## Section II

### **This Only Works TOGETHER - Parent & Child.**

Here is why it is IMPERATIVE that a parent or trusted adult walk through these questions and media with a child:

- **Trauma Triggers**

An event or language in a piece of media might remind our children of past events in their lives which were traumatic. If we are to assume that they have not yet had enough life experience to successfully walk through these situations and make sense of them, then they will need a safe adult to be able to process feelings and emotions.

Some caregiver might be nervous or scared to discuss the details of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and so on. Our children are also scared but have no choice but to live through it. Our children need an adult who can help them process through issues by listening. They need an adult who knows when information needs to be given over to a trusted therapist and other professionals.

- **Reliving Trauma**

Some media might not simply suggest or bring up past trauma but could expose a child to a similar situation as what they have experienced. If a child is exposed to such media, it goes without saying that they will need a safe adult to help them process their thoughts and emotions. They will even need a safe adult who may not have the right answers but can get the child to a professional who can help.

- **Living in a Dream World**

As much as negatively living through trauma can have a devastating effect on our children, too much of a good thing can also have a poor effect when it is experienced on their own. Some children who have come from traumatic backgrounds may have trouble separating fantasy from reality. When given media where the main character is always rescued in the nick of time, the waif always marries royalty, or all problems are solved in a neat package, our children could be given over to considering this is how the world operates and that the solutions of the characters will produce similar fantastical results. It is important to have a trusted adult on duty who can applaud the fun of a tale but also bring everyone back down to reality.

- **Never Really Find Results**

Again it can be a pitfall for caregivers to be nervous about a topic and simply hope that children will learn by experiencing a book or movie on their own. The problem is that many of our children lack the life experience to be able to connect the dots to see how a character's struggles and life solutions could be compared to their own life.

A trusted adult can help a child to glean solutions and conversations from a piece of media to make real life change begin.

## Section III

### How To Use Our Discussion Packets:

#### 1. **Exposure as a Family**

Watch, read, or play the respective media this packet discusses together before you begin the conversation. It is important that parent and child experience things together. Natural bonding and teachable moments come about when we experience things together.

#### 2. **Wait for the Right Time**

As foster and adoptive parents, many of us want to help our children so badly that when we get a new resource we want to try it out faster than a child wants to open up presents on Christmas. However, it is important to judge when your child is ready to talk about issues brought up by media.

If your child is struggling with habitual lying and just reprimanded earlier in the day at school, there might be intense feelings of guilt and embarrassment. It may not be the correct time to point out that Pinocchio gets in trouble when he lies and try to begin a discussion about how lies can harm your life. Instead wait a day or two when everything is going right in your family's world, and then try to begin a conversation.

People who are hurt, angered, frustrated or depressed due to a topic are not going to be open to having a dialogue about the issues.

#### 3. **Nudging Toward Identification**

If we look at this conversation as a swimming pool, "Nudging Toward Identification" is going to be the shallow end of the pool. The goal is to simply notice - just notice - similarities you might see in a character's life and your child's life. This step is helping our children to see that they might be able to relate with a character. The media is going from merely a source of entertainment to something we possibly - POSSIBLY - could connect with in some manner.

This might come in the form of phrases such as:

- "Hey, did you notice that in the book Sally had to figure out how to make friends at school too?"
- "Tom's brother in the movie was really good at soccer just like you, right?!"
- "Too bad you're not in the story with Samantha, because you like learning about science as much as she does, right?"

#### 4. **Emotional Involvement**

In Step 3 we helped our child to consider that they might be able to connect with a character. During this step, if the atmosphere is still good for conversation, we are going to push the similarities with the media character a bit further. We are going to take a look at specific situations and emotions. We are going to take a look at issues that characters confronted and discuss solutions and emotional outcomes. Hopefully, through this step our children will be able to more deeply and emotionally be able to identify with a character.

We might ask questions such as:

- "Sally made up stories to try and make new friends. Do you think this was the right way to make friends? Why? What should she have done differently?"

- “How do you think Tom felt when he missed the goal and lost the soccer game for his team? What would you tell him? Do you ever feel like Tom?”
- “Which do you think made Samantha feel better, winning the science fair or making new friends at school? Do you ever feel like that? Why?”

#### 5. **Continued Conversations**

Always remember that helping children walk through trauma is not a sprint but a marathon. Do not get discouraged if the right time to talk about themes in a piece of media don't turn up right away. Do not get discouraged if your child doesn't want to talk about anything “deep” or life changing.

Some people have reported that their children might watch a movie, lightly discuss it, and then a month later begin asking deeper questions about a theme or topic in the media.

As parents our job is to create an atmosphere where learning and growth can happen AND CAN CONTINUE HAPPENING. We need to equip ourselves with the tools to be ready for those small windows of time that our children are ready to discuss and learn from us.

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## Comprehensive Review

# Transfiguring Adoption's Overview:

The One and Only Ivan is the newest movie to release straight to Disney+ and tells the story of Ivan the gorilla and his group of quirky animal friends who are all part of a circus attraction in a rundown suburban mall. The owner, Mack, goes through several different schemes to try and save the circus including a discovery that Ivan knows how to draw! The movie is based on a novel by the same name, which is in turn based on a true story (which we learn a little about during the credits).

I personally really enjoyed the movie. It was very pretty to watch and had a good balance of humor and poignancy. And there was very little violence, language, etc. making this a good choice for even fairly young children! That said, however, it was also emotionally difficult for me to watch at times, and I say that as an adult who did not experience significant loss in childhood. For children who have experienced this type of trauma, I imagine it would be even sadder for them as there is a LOT of caregiver loss portrayed throughout the film. The movie does technically have a happy ending, but even that is bittersweet. As an animal lover it was also challenging to see the animals being kept in captivity at the circus (though they are mostly well cared-for). Therefore, children on the more sensitive end of the spectrum might also be upset by this. It's definitely one I would recommend watching together so that you can help them process any feelings that the movie may bring up.

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**\*\* Spoilers Could Be Ahead \*\***

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## How Is This Relevant To Adoption & Foster Care?

While The One and Only Ivan doesn't directly address foster care or adoption, it does contain many themes likely to resonate with these children. One of these themes is that of 'found family'. All of the animals in the circus have been separated from their birth families in one way or another. Living together in the circus they become each other's family and these bonds help them endure some of the difficult times they experience. This is especially true when the circus acquires a baby elephant who is very frightened to be in this strange new place. An older Elephant, Stella, instantly takes her under her wing and becomes a surrogate/adoptive mother to the young Ruby. Another example of this is with the stray dog Bob. Ivan takes him under his wing and provides him a safe place to sleep and cares for him like he's part of the family.



Children who have experienced parental loss are also likely to identify with Ivan- We learn through flashbacks that he lost his father and sister to poachers and was then adopted by a human family. He felt loved and safe with them for a while but when his behavior got too much to handle, his adoptive mother left and never came back. Children in the foster care system may especially relate to Ivan's experience as they've moved through several homes and experienced parental loss- sometimes repeatedly.

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## Discussion Points:

- **Expectations vs. Reality**

There is a lot of talk about how characters are perceived vs. who they really are inside. This can be an opportunity to talk about stereotypes and how they affect us. The circus show advertises Ivan as a ferocious and scary animal, even though he is a friendly and kind creature and he only pretends to 'give the people what they want'. There is also some discussion about drawing and 'seeing the world the way you want it to be'. This can be a great lead-in to conversations with children about how they see the world and what their dreams and goals are. Finally, the animals escape the circus to what they think is 'the wild' only to find that it's just a small strip of trees along the highway, which is understandably disappointing to them. This can be a chance to talk about how sometimes we work really hard towards something only to have it not work out the way we expected. Talk about how that doesn't mean you failed, but that sometimes things don't work out the way we plan but can still be a positive thing. Though Ivan didn't get his freedom that night, the adventures inspired him to paint his mural which then inspired animals' rights activists to fight for, and eventually gain his freedom. We all hit stumbling blocks on our paths and it's important to help children realize that just because they experience a setback or disappointment it doesn't mean that they won't eventually reach their dreams.

- **Dealing with Loss**

There are many different instances of caregiver loss throughout the film. We learn of Ivan's traumatic childhood through a series of flashbacks- he lost his father and sister to poachers and was adopted by a human family. However, his behavior was too much, and his adoptive mother abandoned the family. Finally, at the end of the film when the animals are set free, they must say goodbye to Mack (the circus owner and Ivan's adoptive father). This scene makes it clear that even though Mack did care for Ivan and the others, the home he was able to provide wasn't the best situation for them. This is true in many cases of children being placed in foster or adoptive homes- it wasn't that their bio family did not love them, but they just may not have been able to provide the best home for the child at that time. This can be a difficult but very important conversation to have with children- just because they aren't with their bio family doesn't mean that family doesn't love them.

There are also several other losses discussed in the film. We get a brief backstory of Bob the Dog- he was abandoned by his owners and almost drowned but then he shares that his story 'has a happy ending- I ended up here with you!'. Even though he had some traumatic experiences he ended up with his 'found family' of Ivan and the other animals and was still able to have a happy ending in life. This appears to be the case with all of the circus animals- they have all experienced parental and other losses but have been able to form their own family with each other and that helps them get through the difficult times. We see this demonstrated when Stella, the matriarch elephant and unofficial 'mother' of the family, dies. All of the animals are very sad, but they band together and help each other deal with the loss. This can be an opportunity to talk to children about their own experiences of loss and strategies for processing and healing from these traumas.

- **“Not All Humans are Bad” (Trust/Resilience)**

Almost all of the animals in the circus have been hurt by humans at some point- Bob is especially skeptical of them after his owners abandoned him and he almost drowned. However, Stella, and later Ivan, remind us that 'not all humans are bad' and 'they can surprise you'. Despite all of the trauma they have endured at the hands of humans, there are other humans who show them kindness. Julia is a prime example of these as she treats all the animals with love and respect and gives them her friendship. The humans also protest for Ivan and Ruby's release to the wild and eventually are successful and then kind humans from a wildlife refuge rescue them and take them to their freedom. This is a theme that can be a great metaphor for our foster and adoptive kiddos. Many of them have been abused or neglected by their caregivers and therefore may have grown to believe that all adults are bad and that they can't trust anyone. Talk about how you love and care for them and how to recognize if a person can be trusted or not. These animals have been through so much but yet still retain a great capacity to love and form relationships. In a similar way, our kiddos who have been through trauma have an incredible resilience for being able to survive that and be building new relationships.

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## Cautionary Points:

- **Loss of Parents/Parental Figures**

While most of the animals' back stories are not addressed, it is made clear that they have all been separated from their families before coming to live at the circus. Children may have questions about what happened to them and where their parents are. We do get Ivan's backstory- and learn that his father was killed by poachers. While we don't see the death on screen, we do see baby Ivan's face in the flashback as he hears the gunshot. Finally, Stella, the older elephant at the circus who is sort of the mother of the group, dies. This is especially difficult for young Ruby, the baby elephant who has latched on to Stella. For children who have experienced parental losses of their own

these scenes, while not graphic, may still be extremely difficult to watch. Finally, at the end of the film when the animals are set free, they must say goodbye to Mack (the circus owner and Ivan's adoptive father). This scene makes it clear that even though Mack did care for Ivan and the others, the home he was able to provide wasn't the best situation for them. This is true in many cases of children being placed in foster or adoptive homes- it wasn't that their bio family did not love them, but they just may not have been able to provide the best home for the child at that time.

- **Caregiver Abandonment Linked to Behavior**

While this could be lumped in with the above cautionary point- I felt like it deserved its own heading. After Ivan's father is killed, he is rescued from the poachers by Mack and his wife who take them to live in their home as if he is their child. Ivan talks about how wonderful things were and how loved he felt. He then describes normal toddler behavior- such as drawing on the walls and how frustrated his adoptive mother got about this to the point that she leaves the family and never comes back. This is the worst fear of many foster and adoptive children- that at some point they will do something wrong and their new family will decide they don't want them anymore.

- **Economic Difficulties**

The circus is struggling to stay profitable and owner Mack sometimes worries aloud about this and how he is going to afford to take care of all the animals. When Bob the stray dog shows up, he even says "the last thing we need around here is another mouth to feed". For children who have experienced economic insecurity hearing these statements may be upsetting to them- especially if there have been times where they didn't have enough to eat or felt like they were 'another unwanted mouth to feed'. Ivan also gets it into his head that it's his job to 'save the show' and fix the family's problems. Similarly children may have also put themselves into a similar role in their own families, feeling like it was their duty to take care of their parents and siblings.

- **Sibling Separation**

When Ivan finally shares the story of his childhood, we learn he had a sister- Tag. It is unclear from the story what her fate was, but we know Ivan never saw her again and even has a stuffed animal he names 'no-Tag' because it won't ever be her. At the end of the movie, the animals are all set free from the circus but this means that they will be separated from one another and we see several very tearful goodbyes which may be difficult for children to watch, especially if they are separated from their own siblings.

- **Mild Peril**

When the animals escape the circus and run away to freedom there is a brief moment where the rabbit in his fire truck is stuck in the road and a car is coming towards him. Ivan runs back and saves him, but it looks for a moment as if he might be hurt. Ivan also shares a flashback about his childhood in The Wild and poachers chased his family and killed his father. The death happens off screen, but we do feel Ivan's worry and hear the gunshot.

- **Mild 'Bathroom Humor'**

There are a few farting jokes and one scene where a dog bites the security guard on the rear end.

## Discussion Questions

1. **Ivan's job at the circus is to roar and be ferocious and scary. Ivan explains that he's 'just pretending'. He explains that he is really a friendly and happy gorilla and when Julie draws a picture of him this way, he states 'that's the real me!'. What's the real you? Is it different from what people think? How are you different at home vs. your friends vs. meeting someone new?**

Caregiver Note: We all put on different 'faces' for different situations, sometimes without even realizing we are doing it. This question provides the opportunity for you to explore this with your children. If they are struggling to answer it could be helpful to provide examples about yourself- how you act at home with them vs. at work in a meeting. What other people think about them is also a point of concern, especially with children who have experienced trauma and may have behavioral issues. Talk about how they feel people view them and how that may not be the full picture of who they really are.

2. **Activity: Create the 'Real You'**

Caregiver Note: Ivan is happy when Julia draws a picture that really represents who he feels he is inside. Have children draw their own 'real selves' picture as a tie-in to the above question. This can be as simple as drawing or painting a picture for younger children, or for older kids you could have them make a collage of things they feel represent who they are. Talk about the images they include in their art project and why they feel those things represent themselves.

3. **Ivan is talking to his friend Stella one night and asks, "Why do they want an angry gorilla anyway?" Stella's answer is "I think humans like us one way- and gorillas they see as angry." Do you think Stella is right? How do you think this makes Ivan feel? Have you ever experienced something similar- people expecting you to act a certain way because of who you are?**

Caregiver Note: People generally expect stereotypes to be true and for foster and adoptive kiddos this unfortunately means that people expect them to be wild, uncontrollable, and even 'bad'. Similar negative stereotypes exist based on race, socioeconomic status, and even being from certain neighborhoods. So, chances are there has been a time in your child's life where they felt like people stereotyped them before even giving them a chance. By talking about how Ivan feels in this instance it can be a way to lead in to how they felt in their own experiences.

4. **When Ivan is first learning to draw no one seems to be able to tell what he's drawing- Bob keeps guessing extremely wrong things and Julia's father calls it 'scribbles'. How do you think this makes Ivan feel? Julia corrects her father and instantly recognizes Bob's drawing as a beetle. How do you think this changes how Ivan views himself and his abilities?**

Caregiver Note: It can be extremely frustrating when you're trying to communicate but no one understands what you are trying to say. Difficulties with communication are especially common in children who have experienced trauma so it's likely that they have experienced times where they were trying to communicate something (either with words or their behavior) and no one understood what they were trying to say. Talk about the different ways Ivan feels when no one recognizes his picture (frustrated) and when Julia finally does (relieved, proud) and how this might be similar to their own feelings in similar situations.

5. **How do the different animals react when they find out a new animal is going to join the circus? How do their feelings change (or not) once Baby Ruby actually arrives?**

Caregiver Note: When it's first announced that a new animal is coming the circus occupants feel a mixture of excitement and nervousness and some of them even worry that they might 'be replaced'. These feelings all mirror the way children often feel when a new sibling is coming into the home and might be a great way to talk about an expected new baby or foster/adoptive placement. Once Ruby actually arrives most of the animals relax and are happy because she is cute and friendly and fits in with them. Ivan however goes through a phase of jealousy as Ruby steals the show from him and is considered the 'new headliner'. However, as Ivan gets to know her, he begins to care for her and his feelings of jealousy begin to relax.

6. **When Ivan is telling the story of his childhood he says, "sometimes his human friends would get very upset and the little gorilla didn't know why." Have you ever had an experience like this- someone getting upset with you, but you don't know why? How does it make you feel? What could Ivan's caregivers have done to help him understand?**

Caregiver Note: Children who have experienced trauma often have a number of behavioral issues as a result and sometimes struggle to understand social cues. They likely feel like baby Ivan does frequently- realizing they have upset their friends or caregivers but not fully understanding how or why. Talking about Ivan's experience and what his caregivers could have done differently may give you some insight into what might help your kiddos when they experience this. For example, they could have explained to him why they were upset, redirected his behavior, or taught him better coping skills, explained that it was the behavior they found frustrating but that they still loved him, etc. Talking about this scene, it's also an important time to remind children that nothing they do could ever make you abandon them or stop loving them. That even though you may grow frustrated or angry sometimes, that doesn't change how you feel

about them. All foster and adoptive children worry about this- that their caregiver might change their mind about wanting them based on behavior, so seeing this fear play out in Ivan's story could potentially be very anxiety-producing for them and require extra reassurance.

**7. When the animals escape to 'the wild' it turns out to be just a small strip of median between two highways. How do you think they feel when they discover this? Have you ever had something similar happen?**

Caregiver Note: The animals have all spent a lot of time and effort devising a plan for their escape, and Ivan especially feels compelled to find a safe place for baby Ruby after his promise to Stella. They have also all spent years talking about and dreaming of what The Wild will be like. They feel so proud once they make it there only to find out that it's not what they expected at all and are crushingly disappointed. This can be a great conversation starter to discuss children's own dreams and that even when things might not work out the way they had planned, good can still come of it and they can overcome these stumbling blocks and reach their goals. While Ivan did not get his freedom that night, the adventure inspired him to paint his beautiful mural which in turn led to Julia and the animal rights activists fighting for and ultimately winning Ivan his freedom.

**8. Ivan always tells Ruby that he 'can't remember' his childhood, but with the encouragement of his friends he is able to tell his story. Bob tells him there's a difference between 'can't remember' and 'won't remember'. Why do you think it's so hard for Ivan to remember his childhood? Do you think it helped him to share his story with his friends?**

Caregiver Note: It's important to tread carefully with this question so that children don't feel like you are trying to force them to relive or tell their story if they aren't ready. It should always be up to them what and when they want to share regarding their past. But talking about Ivan's experience may help them sort out some of their own feelings. Ivan had a very traumatic childhood- he lost his father and sister, was adopted by Mack and his wife only to have his adoptive mother leave them and ended up living in a cage for over 20 years. It is probably very painful for him to relive these memories. He does eventually do so, in a safe place with his friends/adoptive family. While it's painful for him to share he does seem to have some of his burden lifted once his friends know about his past.

**9. Activity: Dream Boards**

Caregiver Note: When Julia talks to Ivan about drawing, she says she likes it because she can 'draw things the way I want it to be'. In her example she draws herself with her mom and dad, happy and at home, rather than her mom being sick and in the hospital. Ivan does the same when he paints his mural of the lake and trees he wishes he could live near. For this activity, have children imagine the way they want things to be- whether that's the home/family they hope for, their dream job, or anything else they can imagine. Use art supplies to create a 'dream board' of these images- whether it's through a simple

drawing with crayons and markers, finger painting, or making a collage for older children. Anything that makes them happy or depicts what they want for their future can go on it. If possible, hang in the child's room so that they can look at it and remember what they're working towards. They could even add to it as they come up with new dreams or goals. For children who have experienced trauma, it is often difficult for them to plan for the future because they were always in survival mode, living day to day, just trying to get through and stay safe. Activities like this can be a fun way to start getting kids to start thinking about what they want their future to look like, now that they don't have to worry as much as about just surviving. If children have a hard time knowing or articulating what they want, start simple- What colors or images do they like looking at? Flip through books or magazines to find pictures of anything that makes them happy.

**10. How do you think the animals felt when they found out they were getting their freedom, but also that that meant leaving each other?**

Caregiver Note: Ever since Stella died Ivan had worked to find a way to fulfill his promise and get Ruby to freedom. However, when the time comes this doesn't happen in the way that he had imagined (with all the animals going off into the wild to live together). Instead, they are split up and all taken to new homes. They all end up with better living conditions than they had at the circus, but it is still very hard to lose his surrogate family so the transition is bittersweet- they are all safe and free but they are no longer together. This is likely to especially resonate with children who have been split up from their birth parents or siblings. They may understand that they are in a happier and safer place now, but it's still hard to be separated from family members.



## About the Reviewer

### **JENN EHLERS**

Jenn is a central Virginia native who received her BA in Psychology from the University of Virginia in 2012. Since then she has worked for a local mental health agency and the Department of Social Services in various capacities and has been involved in her community's efforts to create a Trauma Informed Network. Currently Jenn works in vocational rehab and mentors youth in foster care. When she isn't working, Jenn enjoys writing stories, anything and everything Harry Potter, and spending time with her niece and nephew.