

Education & Adoption: Issues to Keep In Mind When Working With Students and Families

In working with adoptive families, one thing to keep in mind is that, although adoption is often a positive experience, it was created by loss. Many children who have been adopted continue to grieve the loss of their biological parents throughout their lives.

They have mixed feelings about their adoption and often question, *Will I be accepted or rejected by my adoptive family? Am I deserving of love and acceptance? What is my role in this world?*

According to the book *Adoption and the Schools*, 20 percent of the population is touched by adoption in some way. At some point, you will encounter student who have either experience adoption or know someone who has been adopted.

Being adopted is not the same experience for everyone, so many factors impact a child and family's experience. Each child's experience will differ, depending on the type of adoption; for example, international, domestic, or foster care adoption.

Other factors that will affect a child's experiences are their age and previous life experiences. If they were adopted internationally, they may not know anything about their biological family. If they were adopted from the foster care system, they

may have lingering issues resulting from abuse and neglect.

Circumstances make each situation unique, so, as an educator, continue to be cautious of generalizations. For example, sometimes children who have been adopted may continue to have regular or periodic contact with their birth family members.



Be aware of social stigmas and stereotypes, such as using words like “biological parent” instead of “real parent,” so you can be sensitive to classroom needs—especially when assigning homework, handling behavioral issues, and scheduling Individualized Education Plans.

Adoption is not a “one size fits all.” Each child will grieve in his own way.

How You Can Get Involved

- **Be sensitive to each child** in the classroom. Depending on your relationship with the child's parents, you may want to find out if a child knows that she has been adopted. For adoption-related materials, visit [the lending library on our website](#).
- **Become informed.** Learn as much about the children in your classroom as possible. This is especially important for

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children who are showing signs of behavioral issues, which obviously happen with children born to their family, as well. Trying to find out the trigger of a behavior is key to helping each child cope or overcome each situation.

- **Continue to be flexible with your curriculum.**

Sometimes projects such as family trees or gene-o-grams may confuse, frustrate, or stir up mixed feelings among children, especially teens.

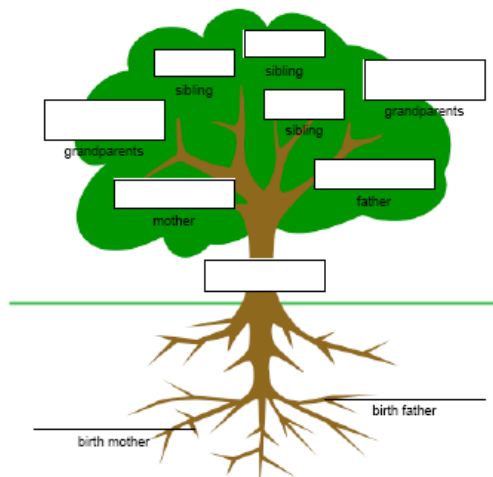
- **Find creative ways to accommodate all types of families.** For example, instead of having children create a family tree, have them talk about what family means to them, or allow them to create a tree of all family members, including biological family members as the roots, foster families as the trunk, and adoptive family members as the branches. If there is ever a question about the appropriateness of an assignment, discuss it with the child's parents first.

Other assignments that may be difficult for children who have been adopted include: bringing in baby pictures to share, discussing the child's past, heritage, and genetics assignments. For more information, please visit [Tackling Tricky Assignments](#) on the Adoptive Families website, adoptivefamilies.com.

- **Continue to reinforce that every family is unique.** For ideas on classroom activities, please visit emkpress.com/school.

- **Use positive adoption language,** such as, "my child" instead of "my own child," or "created an adoption plan" instead of "gave a child up for adoption." For further examples, [please visit this site](#).

My Heritage



- **Advocate for and support parents.**

Continue taking extra time to meet with parents regarding their children. When meeting with parents, focus on discussing each child's strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. Keeping parents informed about their child's behavior and educational standing will help them to

assist their child with possible educational needs, and allow parents to be more prepared if their child is in need of an IEP.

If the child is in need of an IEP, continue to support the parents during meetings by allowing them a chance to speak and be heard. You may want to find out what tactics work for each parent and ask for their input on behavioral challenges.

The Coalition hosts trainings that may be helpful. For more information about those, please see the [Calendar on our website](#) or call us at 1-800-762-8063.

The Effects of Trauma

Some degree of trauma among children who have been adopted is common, especially if they were adopted from orphanages overseas at an older age or were adopted from the foster care system.

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Thank you for taking the time to find out more about the loss and trauma that some children who were adopted carry with them.



According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “A traumatic event can seriously interrupt the school routine and the processes of teaching and learning. They may have increase difficulties concentrating and learning at school and may engage in unusually reckless behavior. Conversely, they may also shut down completely and their silence belies the turmoil that’s happening within.”

[This resource](#) provides an example on the way a single event affected three students differently.

Another example of how educators can inadvertently impact a child’s perception is: A fourth grade girl who was born in Guatemala was adopted at nine months by a Wisconsin family. When her class was learning about immigration, the teacher referred to this girl as an immigrant. This upset her and changed her views about her heritage and adoption story.

Teachers impact children’s lives in many ways. Children who have been adopted can be profoundly affected by the investment that you, as a teacher, make in helping them heal from trauma. You touch each child in a special way and respond to every child’s special need.

Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Adoption and the Schools*, by Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng

Additional Resources

- [Adoptive Families](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Adoption and School](#)
- [Adoption and the Schools](#)