

## Adoption at School: Homework Triggers

“I’m not doing my homework and you can’t make me!”

Many parents have heard this comment and most parents have struggled from time to time with a child’s resistance to completing homework. There are many reasons why homework isn’t a number one priority for kids: It’s too hard, it’s too easy, it’s boring, or they’d simply rather be doing something else.

As an adoptive parent, you know that many childhood issues have an adoption “overlay.” This means that, while you’re aware that certain things are typical for your child’s age or stage of development, you also know that your child’s adoption may be a factor in behaviors that you see.

Homework assignments and other school activities are examples of events that can spark a reaction in your child that may be adoption related; something that may go beyond what you’d expect as typical for a child’s age or stage of development.

School assignments can vary from school district to school district. However, we’ve learned from other adoptive parents that there are some classroom assignments that can be difficult for children or youth who were adopted. The following are a few

examples of assignments that your children may be asked to complete. If you see one of these assignments in your child’s backpack, you might consider talking with your child to see if he has any questions or concerns. You could look at this as an opportunity to bring up adoption, especially if you haven’t talked about it for a while. It’s important for you or your partner to contact your child’s teacher right away if your child is expressing concerns about completing the assignment.



Here are some examples of homework assignments that might be challenging for children or youth who were adopted:

### **Autobiographies and timelines of the student’s life:**

These assignments can be difficult for children who have

incomplete information about their early lives. Children who have experienced traumatic events such as abuse or neglect, or who have witnessed violence, alcohol abuse, or drug use, might have strong emotional reactions when thinking about past events in their lives.

**Baby pictures:** This assignment might come up anywhere from kindergarten (“Let’s see how you’ve grown!”) to seniors in high school (“Our Seniors: Then and Now”). Many children who were adopted don’t have any pictures of themselves as an infant. If there’s an assignment that asks them to bring in a

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baby picture, it may trigger feelings of sadness, because a child thinks about a time that seems to be lost. And although other students may not have baby pictures either, the child who was adopted may not be comfortable explaining that their early life was in an orphanage or in foster care, and that's why they don't have a baby picture. Sometimes the baby picture activity asks students to match a baby picture with a student in the class. One student who was adopted internationally said, "I'm used to looking different. But I don't like to be reminded about it."

**Family trees:** These can be challenging because a child who was adopted has two families, and typical family tree diagrams don't have room for both. You may see a struggle with "divided loyalties" if the child has to choose between the adoptive or birth family. If a child chooses to use a birth family on the family tree diagram, you might not have all the information to help your child fill in the branches of the tree. And you may struggle yourself with this decision to focus on the birth family. Some children may have close ties with a foster family, and this adds another layer of conflicted emotions because they may wonder why that family doesn't "count" as part of their family tree.

**Celebrations that focus on the child or on family:** Sometimes it's puzzling to figure



out why an activity might be a trigger for an adoption-related reaction. One example is the "Star of the Week" or "I'm a VIP" activity, which is simply asking children to share information that they'd like others to know about them. But when they see that other students have brought in a poster filled with family photos, it can trigger feelings of grief as children think about people, places, or things they have lost. Children who were adopted at an older age may be reminded of family times that were painful, confusing, or traumatic.

**Birthdays:** This is another activity that is typically a fun day for children and youth. However, for children who have been adopted, this day can bring up feelings of loss and questions such as: Does my birth mother or birth father think of me on my birthday? What time of day was I born? How was I named? Was I named after somebody in my birth family? Who was there when I was born? For children adopted at an older age, a birthday celebration might bring up painful reminders of past birthdays. If birthdays are generally celebrated at school, for example by bringing in treats, keep in mind that some children may prefer not to celebrate a birthday at all.

**Mother's Day/Father's Day:** Many adoptive parents have seen difficult behaviors surface when there's a school activity that asks a student to make cards or gifts for parents (or grandparents) on a special day. A child may see this assignment as a forced choice between two people: birth mother or adoptive mother, birth father or adoptive father. Some families have special ways of recognizing the birth parents around these holidays, and that can help a child to honor both sets of parents.

**Genetics and heredity:** Sometimes students are asked to match their eye color or other characteristics with people in their family. Children or youth who were adopted

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might not have anyone else who looks like them. This assignment can trigger feelings of grief and loss because it might bring up questions about the birth family such as: Where is my birth family now? Are they doing OK? Why was I placed for adoption? When students learn about genetically-inherited traits or diseases, they may worry about their genetic background and how that affects them now or will potentially affect them, or their children, in the future.

**Cultural Background Research:** It's important for all of us to know our roots. Teachers recognize this, and may ask students to research a county where their ancestors came from. For children who were adopted, this assignment may bring up questions about which family to research: their birth family or their adoptive family. Because they are touched by the culture of both families, this can become a difficult choice. As with the family tree assignment, choosing one family over another can bring up feelings of divided loyalties. For example, a child or youth who was born in China and who decides to research his adoptive parents' country of Ireland, may face questions from classmates that he's not prepared to answer. You may need to help your child decide how to approach this assignment.

**Adopt-A-Projects:** A classroom may have a special project where they choose to take care of, or support, a place, a tree, an animal, etc. Using the word "adopt" in these projects can be confusing to a child who is a concrete thinker. These projects often include raising

money, or are temporary, or need to be renewed each year. None of those aspects of adoption match what you've taught your child about his or her own adoption. You might suggest to the teacher that such a project use the term "support" instead of "adopt." The words we use go a long way to clearing up misunderstandings.

### Helping Your Child Cope with Assignments

There are a few ways to help a child or youth who is struggling with a school project. One option is to talk to the teacher. Sometimes teachers are simply unaware that an activity might be difficult for children who were adopted. Teachers are often open to creating

alternatives when they understand that an assignment can be painful or embarrassing for some of their students. Your child's teacher might be open to broadening the scope of an activity for all students, not just for your child.



Another option would be to work with your child to alter the assignment in a way that still meets the teacher's objective, but allows some flexibility. For example, your child could share a photo from any time when she was younger, even if it's not a baby picture. You could decide together which family to include on the family tree. You can help your child with the difficult parts of an autobiography, deciding which events to leave out while still giving a true picture of the child's life. Your child's "Star of the Week" poster can be filled with information about hobbies, pets, or sports, and can be either photos or pictures from a magazine, rather than photos of family and growing-up

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years. Working on homework together might give you an opening to talk about adoption, which lets your child know that this is a safe subject.

Questions from classmates can come up in reaction to some assignments or activities. “Why don’t you have a baby picture?” “Why do you have two families on your family tree?” “Why aren’t you bringing treats for your birthday?” A strategy called “W.I.S.E. UP!”© offers some ideas for how a child can respond to difficult-to-answer questions:

- Many children choose to **w**alk away, or change the subject. This gives them time to think about how to respond, or to choose not to respond at all.
- Other children use a statement like, “**I**t’s private. I only talk about that with my family.”
- Depending on who asks the question, or the tone of the comment, a child may choose to **s**hare some information about his or her adoption. “I was adopted when I was five years old,” is an example of sharing one piece of information. If the conversation spirals into something the child doesn’t want to continue talking about, walking away, changing the subject, or saying “It’s private,” are all suitable responses.
- If he wants to help another person understand adoption, the child could respond with some information that **e**ducates the questioner.

*(The W.I.S.E Up!© PowerBook is a guide that helps you practice these different responses with your child. You can check it out from the [Lending Library](#).)*

You might consider asking the teacher to give you a call or send you an email if something comes up that could be a trigger for your child. You could share this tip sheet with the teacher, as well as the list of resources below. Another resource is the

[video on our website](#), which talks directly to teachers about some alternatives to potentially troublesome family-based assignments. The more the teacher knows about adoption, the easier it will be for him or her to recognize situations that could be potential triggers.



Encouraging children to do homework is an ongoing challenge in many families. Recognizing that an assignment might bring up thoughts, concerns, or questions in a child’s mind can help in uncovering a reason that a child may resist a particular homework project.

The conversation you have with your child about how to approach the assignment can open the door for questions about adoption, birth family, and their own history. Adoption is a lifelong journey, and your child will need you there for guidance throughout each grade level or stage of development. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to the Wisconsin Family Connections Center; we are here to help.



## Resources

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Adoption and the Schools*, by Nancy Ng and Lansing Wood
- *Help for Billy*, by Heather T. Forbes
- *W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook*, by Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc.
- Partners Newsletter: [Adoption in the Classroom](#)