

Education & Adoption: Working With Students and Families

Do you know anyone who is adopted? Do you have any friends or family members who have adopted children? The answer, most likely, is yes. And as an educator, you meet far more children and families than the average person. Depending on the length of time in your profession, you most likely have had more than one child in your classroom who was adopted.

Current statistics can help us understand how many lives adoption touches and may take you by surprise. Recent research shows that there are 1.5 million adopted children in the US. That translates to roughly 1 out of every 25 families. Almost 100 million Americans have an adoptee in their immediate family.

Adoption transforms lives, and every adoption story is unique. Some children may have been adopted as infants. Others may have spent a portion of their lives in foster care. Some children may have been adopted by relatives. Although adoption is often a joyous experience, it does go hand in hand with grief. These children may grieve the loss of people, places, and relationships, no matter their age when they joined their family. This grief can lead to big emotions. We know you want your classroom to be an inclusive, safe space for everyone. Let's look at how you can



make that happen.

The Language of Adoption

“Are those your real parents?” You wouldn’t let a child get away with swearing in your classroom or using racist language. As importantly, you need to be aware of negative language related to adoption. The language we choose can be immensely powerful. All families are “real” families, and all parents are “real parents.” Once a child has been adopted, the new parents are simply the child’s mother, father, or parents.

It’s important that teachers understand this and model appropriate, positive language.

The National Council for Adoption has an excellent chart showing examples of accurate adoption language. When might this be applicable in a classroom? In addition to the teachable moment portrayed above, adoption may come up during lessons about how

families come together—multiracial, blended, divorced, and adoptive families. It will undoubtedly be discussed during studies of genetics or inherited characteristics. In addition, many pieces of literature have adoption as a plotline.

As a teacher, you can be a valuable source of assistance and advocacy for a child who was

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adopted. Occasions may arise when a child is asked a personal question about adoption that they are unable to answer, or a child may be teased about their birth or adoptive family. It is the child's choice to discuss it or not. As a support to the child, you may need to step in and let that be known. Seek input from the child's parents about how best to handle the situation. They will likely be grateful you are looking for ways to support the child.

Trauma and Adoption

Outside the family, teachers and other school staff play a huge role in a child's development, based on the amount of time spent in the school setting. It's essential for teachers to be aware of the behaviors that some children—both pre- and post-adoption—might exhibit in the classroom. The time leading up to an adoption and after the adoption is finalized can be stressful. Children may exhibit unique behaviors during this time. Instead of focusing on the behaviors, you may want to dig deeper and explore the underlying reasons. Children who are in the process of adoption may be dealing with the following:

- Grappling with issues related to identity, belonging, or attachment
- Experiencing loss and grief, and the confusion of why they feel that way during what is supposed to be a happy time
- Figuring out how to be in a family of a different culture or ethnic group

As any good teacher knows, relationships are key. Kids learn the most from teachers when they have a positive connection. It can be hard to adjust your classroom expectations. However, children who may have experienced significant trauma or prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol may have educational and behavioral goals that are slightly different from their peers. You may need to consider variations in your teaching

techniques or classroom management. For example:

- Isolating punishments such as time out or separation from the class might trigger a negative or unexpected response in some children. If the child has off-task behavior during work time, perhaps you can spend a few moments sitting next to them as a “time in” to help them regulate.
- If a child exhibits a negative, unexpected response, remain calm. Give the child time to become emotionally regulated before discussing the consequences of the behavior.
- Write out a schedule to enable the child to follow along visually. Inform the child when there is going to be a change in routine.

Curriculum Concerns

Family trees. Baby pictures. Adopt a Highway. Genetics. Researching cultural backgrounds. These are all topics that can be triggering for not only adoptees but for any child from a family that may have come together in a way that is not seen as “traditional.” Sometimes, teachers give kids who were adopted alternate assignments from the rest of the class. Although that may seem helpful and compassionate, it further points out how they differ from “everyone else.” Instead of creating an alternative assignment, consider the goals of each project and determine if there are different routes you could take to reach the same purpose.

For example, if the goal of a family tree assignment is researching the past, choose a historical event such as Hurricane Katrina or 9/11 and have your students interview family members, neighbors, or teachers about their remembrances of it. If the goal is to learn more about their family, have them write about family traditions and have family members assist them in tracing the tradition back to when it started and why. For

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example, the question of why a family eats lasagna and turkey on Thanksgiving could be traced back to relatives who immigrated from Italy.

Common assignments and ideas for alternatives can be found in our tip sheet [Adoption at School: Homework Triggers](#).

Be an Advocate

Intrusive questions about adoption are the norm for most school-age kids. Help your students feel empowered to share or not share what they want regarding their adoption story. Never share something about a child's story without their permission.

Educators can be advocates for children who were adopted and their families. It can be frustrating for adoptive parents when they feel like no one in the school understands their child. You can be that one person in the school or district who is their champion. Share what you have learned here during teachable moments with other teachers, librarians, school counselors or social workers, lunchroom monitors, or classroom aides. We encourage you to look at the book resource list and consider purchasing some titles for your classroom or professional library. Thank you for supporting our children and families!



Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [School Tools](#)
- *ABC, Adoption & Me*, by Gayle Swift
- *And That's Why She's My Mama*, by Tiarra Nazario

- *We're All Not the Same, But We're Still Family: An Adoption and Birth Family Story*, by Theresa Fraser and Eric E.W. Fraser
- *My New Mom & Me*, by Renata Galindo
- *Yes, I'm Adopted!*, by Sharlie Zinniger
- *Adopted Teens Only: A Survival Guide To Adolescence*, by Danae Gorbett
- *The Face in the Mirror: Teenagers and Adoption*, by Marion Crook
- *Two Moms in My Heart: Teens Write About the Adoption Option*, by Youth Communication and edited by Al Desetta
- *Pictures of Hollis Woods*, by Patricia Reilly Giff
- *I Will Never Give Up*, by Derek W. Clark
- *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*, by Kristin Souers with Pete Hall
- *Building Self-Esteem in Children and Teens Who Are Adopted or Fostered*, by Dr. Sue Cornbluth
- *Groundbreaking Interventions: Working With Traumatized Children, Teens, and Families in Foster Care and Adoption*, by Jeanette Yoffe, M.A., M.F.T.
- *Adoption and the Schools*, by Lansing Wood & Nancy Ng
- *Teaching the Hurt Child - Relationships Between Trauma, Attachment, and Learning*, by Andrea Chatwin

Tip Sheet

- [Adoption at School: Homework Triggers](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Erasing the Belonging Gap Within Schools](#)
- [Conscious Responses: What Parents and Schools Need to Know to Support Kids Impacted by Trauma](#)