Navigating Homework Challenges: Understanding Triggers for Children in Alternative Living Arrangements

Many parents have probably heard their children say, *"I don't want to do this assignment."* A child's resistance to completing homework could be due to several reasons: It might be too hard, too easy, boring, or they'd simply rather be doing something else.

When a child says, *"I don't want to do this assignment,"* along with, *"It makes me uncomfortable. Can I just skip this?"* it's essential for parents and caregivers—especially those of children in foster care, kinship arrangements, adopted children, or other alternative living arrangements—to recognize that these feelings may be linked to their unique experiences. Many childhood issues can have underlying emotional triggers related to their living situations.

Homework assignments and other school activities that ask for personal information about family history, baby pictures, or cultural backgrounds can spark a reaction in your child. They may be struggling with feelings of grief, confusion, or divided loyalty, reflecting their complex family dynamics.

Understanding that these reactions may go beyond what you'd expect as typical for a child's age or stage of development allows you to provide the necessary support and guidance during these challenging moments, fostering open communication and emotional safety.

School assignments can vary from school district to school district. However, we've learned from other parents and caregivers that some classroom assignments can be challenging for children or youth with complex living arrangements. Here are a few examples:

- **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"). Assignments asking for baby pictures can be distressing, especially for children who were adopted or for those who were or are in foster care, as they may not have any pictures of themselves as infants. If an assignment asks them to bring in a baby picture, it may trigger feelings of sadness and loss. Although other students may not have baby pictures, children with a particularly challenging upbringing may not be comfortable sharing with their peers. Sometimes, the baby picture activity asks students to match a baby picture with a student in the class.

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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:** Family tree assignments can be particularly challenging for children with multiple family connections. They may grapple with divided loyalties, unsure how to represent their unique family makeup. For example, it can be challenging and confusing for a child who was adopted. You may see them struggle with "divided loyalties" if they have to choose between the adoptive or birth family if there is only enough room on the tree for one family. If a child decides to use a birth family on the family tree diagram, you might not have all the information to help your child fill in the tree branches. 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. It can be even more complicated to explain a child's situation when a relative adopts them, as this alters their official family connections and relationships.
- **Mother's Day/Father's Day:** Caregivers have seen difficult behaviors surface when a school activity 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 multiple people who may have filled those roles for them, such as a birth mother, foster mother, grandmother, auntie, neighbor, or adoptive mother.

  Some families have unique ways of recognizing the birth parents, kin, and other caregivers around these holidays, and that can help normalize that a child can honor more than one person if they so choose. This can be a great conversation to have with your child's teacher and school to bring awareness and offer creative solutions.
- **Genetics and heredity:** Students are sometimes asked to match their eye color or other characteristics with family members. Children or youth who may be in a situation where they have limited information about one or both biological parents might not have anyone else who looks like them. Like other assignments, this one can trigger feelings of grief and loss and raise questions due to the unknown. When students learn about genetically inherited traits or diseases, they may also worry about their genetic background and how it affects them now or could 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 country where their ancestors originated. For children who are adopted or may, in general, have limited information for several reasons, this assignment may bring up questions about what background to research: their birth family, their adoptive family, and/or which ethnic background if they are multi-ethnic. This can become a difficult choice because they may be touched by the culture of one or multiple families. As with the family tree assignment, choosing one family over another can bring up feelings of divided loyalties. You may need to help your child decide how to approach this assignment.
- **Adopt-A Projects:** A classroom may have a particular 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, are temporary, or need to be renewed yearly. For the child who was adopted, none of those aspects of adoption

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match what their parents may have taught them about their adoption. If you are the child's parent, 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.

- **Celebrations that focus on the child or family:** Sometimes, figuring out why an activity might be a trigger is puzzling. One example is the "Star of the Week" or "I'm a VIP" activity, which asks children to share information they'd like others to know about them when they are chosen for the spotlight. But seeing that other students have brought in a poster filled with family photos can trigger feelings of grief as children think about people, places, or things they have lost. Children who found permanency at an older age may be reminded of family times that were painful, confusing, or traumatic.
- **Birthdays:** This is not necessarily a homework assignment but another pertinent area to highlight. Birthdays are another activity that is typically fun for children and youth. However, birthday celebrations can bring up feelings of loss and questions about biological, extended family, former foster families, and other lost connections. For instance, a foster care child may wonder, *"Will I get to spend my birthday with mom and dad?"* A child who was adopted may be wondering, "*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?"* Other children may have painful reminders of past celebrations on their birthdays and may prefer not to celebrate their birthdays at all. More and more schools are no longer celebrating birthdays at school for a multitude of reasons. If birthdays are still celebrated at your child's school, for example, by bringing in treats, it may be helpful to notify the teacher about your child's preference for their birthday.

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 unaware of how certain assignments could impact students. They may also not know your child's complex history. Teachers are often open to creating alternatives when they understand that an assignment can be painful or embarrassing for some 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 they were 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 giving an accurate 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 years. Working on homework together might give you an opening to talk about and help them process their past traumas, letting your child know this is a safe subject.

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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 ideas for how a child can respond to difficult-to-answer questions. While this curriculum was intended to help empower children who were adopted, there is another version that has been tailored to meet the specific needs of children in foster care (referenced on the last page). All of the strategies below have been and can be tweaked to help empower children with complex histories and alternative living arrangements to navigate conversations confidently.

- Many children choose to walk away or change the subject. This gives them time to think about how to respond or choose not to respond at all.
- Other children use a statement like, *"It'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 share some information about their 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 the child wants to help another person understand adoption, they could respond with some information that educates 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 Resource Library.)

You might consider asking the teacher to call or email you if something comes up that could be a trigger for your child. You could share this tip sheet with the teacher and the list of resources below. Another resource is the video on our YouTube channel, **Tips for Teachers**, 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 them to recognize situations that could be potential triggers.

Recognizing that an assignment might raise thoughts, concerns, or questions in a child can help uncover a reason for the child's resistance to 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 get in touch with the Wisconsin Family Connections Center; we are here to help.

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Resources

From the Resource 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.
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: Changing Schools – How Foster Parents Can Empower Children In Care
- Partners Newsletter: Adoption in the Classroom
- Education & Adoption: Working With Students and Families
- Helping Children & Youth in Care Achieve School Success

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