



**A NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc.  
Training Curriculum for Foster and Adoptive Families  
Parenting Children with Special Needs**

# **Educating Others About Adoption And Foster Care: Tools for Families**

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# **I. Pre-Opening**

- **Time Required:** As long as it takes for people to gather. Don't worry about getting a reply from everyone, it's not as important as getting started on time.
- **Supplies:** Note cards preprinted with the question, "Who in my community needs to learn more about adoption and foster care issues affecting my family, and why?" Handout packets or folders – if possible print handouts on different colored paper for ease of identification

Hand out the note cards as people enter the room, or place next to the participant sign in sheet with a prominent sign asking them to complete the card and drop in a container. Have pencils available. Collect the cards just before you begin to use during the introduction.

# **II. Introduction**

**Time Required:** Adjust your introduction time to how much time you have available. In general, limit your introduction to no more than 10 to 15 minutes.

## **A. Introduce yourself and why you are there**

Keep information about you and/or your organization to a minimum in order concentrate on what people want to know about and what you hope they will leave with.

## **B. Attendees – Ask who is there and why**

Asking for a show of hands is an easy way to find out who is in the room – parents, providers, etc. If you have time ask a few people to explain who and why they are interested in educating about adoption and foster care. (Be aware that people often want to tell their story, ask for *brief* comments.)

If time is limited, read and comment on some of the responses from the cards you collected. Take note of any common themes. If time permits, and you have a willing helper, you might record some of the responses on a flip chart to refer to later.

## **C. Introduce the workshop theme**

- 1) Foster and Adoptive families caring for children with complicated family histories and health care needs are often required to work with helping professionals outside the child welfare system who may not be aware of adoption/foster care issues affecting the children and families they serve, and/or the effectiveness of the interventions they propose.
- 2) This workshop is designed to provide foster/adoptive parents with tools, techniques and encouragement to assume an active role in educating others about the realities of foster care and adoption.

- 3) Emphasize - Parents are the real experts about their own children, they know what others need to know, and can help them understand.
- 4) Though the following is written training for foster and adoptive parents and caregivers, it is also intended to provide ideas, strategies, and resources for training for non-child welfare professionals who serve foster/adoptive families.

#### **D. Housekeeping Issues**

- 1) Announce projected time frames, i.e. lecture time, discussion period, wrap up and evaluation forms.
- 2) Point out handouts and how you will use them. Mention any evaluation/feedback forms you plan to collect. Suggestion: Print handouts on different colored paper for easy identification.
- 3) Print or obtain at least one copy of each resource listed on Handout # 8 Resources for Educating Others to refer to during your presentation. Most can be duplicated, or multiple copies obtained for a reasonable fee. Have them on a table for people to peruse while they gather or pass them around during the workshop.
- 4) Let people know how you wish to handle participant questions/comments (i.e. at the end, any time during the workshop, at the end of a topic, etc.
- 5) Review Thoughts on Educating Ourselves and Others in section V. Consider posting as signs in the classroom.

# **III. Education Basics**

## **A. Know Your Curriculum**

- 1) Educate yourself - If you are going to teach/educate others, you have to widen your own horizons and become an expert on the issues you want others to understand.
- 2) Research and think deeply about the normal issues/circumstances that most (if not all) adoptive and/or foster families deal with, and how they affect your own family and child. Familiarize yourself with the 7 core issues of adoption, the impact of abuse and neglect on kids, how adoption impacts children at school, and kids feelings about being in care.

***Refer to/Discuss:***

- *Handout #1 - The Seven Core Issues of Adoption*
- *Handout #2 - The Realities of Adoption*
- *Handout #3 - Adoptive Families Are Different*
- *Handout #4 - Adoption and School Issues Factsheet for Families*
- *Handout #5 - A Child's Point of View on Foster Care*

## **B. Know and understand your students**

- 1) Identify who needs to know what, and why? It might be teachers; therapists; service providers; or others in your child's life such as coaches, youth group leaders, neighbors, or even other family members. Think about what bothers you that people don't understand and be able to articulate it to yourself. Remember, knowing the name of the problem is 90% of the solution. Think carefully and deeply about things you want others to understand about your child's history and adjustment to adoption and or foster care.
- 2) Don't expect others to know or understand what you do. It's OK, they haven't had the same experiences you have, and may have never thought about adoption and foster care issues affecting kids and families. Assume they don't know things and you can help them. You know things nobody else knows about your child (i.e. what happens at bedtime or re-occurring behaviors when a child gets home from school.)
- 3) Helping professionals want to succeed at their job and need your information to provide appropriate and successful services. You are providing a service by helping them learn the things they need to know to better serve your child. If you don't tell them, who will?
- 4) Understand their policies, procedures and problems. For instance, familiarize yourself with state and local school policies, procedures, and regulations for enrollment, attendance discipline, grading and special education. (See Children Adrift on Handout #8 for an excellent overview of the NYS education law/regulation and its relationship/interaction with child welfare regulations

- 5) Understand your service provider agency's mission, funding, and limitations. What might be getting in the way of their understanding, what do they think their responsibilities are, what are they trying to achieve, what kinds of organizational mandates do they have to meet? Ask questions until you understand. People like to talk about their own goals, ideas, and opinions. The more you know about them, the more you'll know about how to help your child.

**Refer to/Discuss:**

- Handout #6 - Adoptive families and Professionals: When Experts Make Things Worse
- Handout #7 - 20 Things Parents Wish Providers Knew and Would Remember

## **IV. Tips on Crafting Your Lesson Plan.**

### **A. Identify your teaching objectives.**

- 1) Know what you specifically want specific people to know and be able to articulate it.
- 2) Think back to "knowing your curriculum", you may have different objectives for different people.

### **B. Recruit Teaching Assistants**

- 1) Identify people who can inform and assist you. Note the word *assistant* - remember you are the expert about your own child and your own family, and are they best judge of what others need to know about you. Don't wait for others, it's part of your job as a parent and you *can* make a difference.
- 2) Who might help?
  - Search out and talk to other foster and adoptive parents who share your concerns and may be willing to join you, or have good advice about successful strategies and tools.
  - Search out local support groups and get involved with, or encourage them to develop, community education projects.
  - State and local advocacy organizations: (i.e. Parent to Parent NYS, Families Together, Disability Provider Associations.) Most have excellent advocacy and educational resources and can put you in touch with other parents/advocates in your community who share your concerns.
  - Explore online resources: The Internet is loaded with training resources, and advocacy/educational curriculums from a plethora of national/state organizations. If you don't have access to the Internet - get it - or use the services available at your public library. The NYSCCC website section on helping services is a good place to start.

### **C. Engage Your Audience**

- 1) Identify and share stories and statistics that illustrate the problem you are trying to solve, or the point you are trying to make. Personalize it! Be shameless, use whatever it takes to make it real, just make sure your stories and facts are genuine.
- 2) Think about and identify what's in it for them. Communicate your understanding of their goals and how learning more about adoption or foster care will make their job easier.
- 3) Identify and share resources with them that support, illuminate, or explain the concept/facts that you want to communicate.

**Use/Refer to:**

Handout #8 Resources For Educating Others About the Realities of Adoption and Foster Care.

Most of these are too expensive or bulky to distribute to all attendees, but you should have a copy of each to exhibit and pass around. Suggestion: print the handout on a bright/noticeable color of paper as you may want to refer back to it when discussing education strategies.

## **D. Recognize Teachable Moments**

- 1) Case conferences, CSE meetings, and school conferences – these are supposed to be planning discussions and conversations. You are a peer participant, not a client or observer. Come prepared to share what you know.
- 2) Even court appearances can offer opportunities to educate. Foster Parents have a statutory right to “an opportunity to be heard” in permanency hearings. For instance, the 2005 permanency law requires LDSS to address a child’s educational needs in the permanency plan and schools to cooperate in the educational components of a court approved plan.
- 3) Recognize misunderstandings as opportunities to educate. When you find yourself thinking “they just don’t get it”, think instead about how you can help them understand. When you discussing a problem start with what you know and feel, rather than what others are doing wrong. 3 simple steps:
  - Here’s what I know’
  - Here’s what concerns me about what I know
  - Here’s what I think might help
- 4) Practice good communication skills. Take the time to express yourself clearly and completely. Slow down and give your listeners information about what you are experiencing.

### **Refer to/Discuss**

Handout #9 - Communication Emergency Kit

Handout #10 - Expressing Yourself Clearly and Completely

# **V. Community Education Opportunities and Strategies**

## **A. Distribute Copies of Resources to Others**

- 1) Approach your local parent group, agency, or a local business for funding and distribute free copies to groups you feel need more information
- 2) Iowa Foster/Adoptive Parent Association booklet "Adoption Basics for Educators", (see handout #8"
- 3) Audio DVD's of NYSCCC workshops, (i.e. Sue Badeau on Separation and Loss or Family Focus presentations on the Realities of Adoption.) See NYSCCC website, selected will be available for free download in the future.

## **B. Get on the Agenda**

- 1) School district superintendent conferences
- 2) CSE or Teacher Union Meetings
- 3) Service Provider Conferences
- 4) Churches
- 5) Local provider agency in-services: DSS, mental health clinic, parenting programs, health clinics
- 6) Service clubs such as Rotary, Kiwanis have a speaker giving a short 10-15 minute presentation at every weekly meeting. They are always looking for new presenters and topics. Most human service agency directors/administrative staff, and many doctors, therapist belong to a service club.
- 7) Offer to provide a lesson plan for your child's classroom. (See Adoptive Family Magazine resources on handout #8 )

**Refer to/Discuss**

Handout #11 - [The Great Back to School Adoption Kit](#)

## **C. Media – Think Non-Traditional**

- 1) Offer to provide articles for agency /organization in –house newsletters
- 2) School district teacher bulletins
- 3) Local TV/Radio talk shows
- 4) Local newspaper opinion pages

## **D. Information Booths**

- 1) Teacher or Service Providers Conferences
- 2) Local Legislative Meetings
- 3) School Board Meetings
- 4) Community Events

## **E. Sponsor Learning Opportunities**

- 1) Raise money to sponsor a big name for community seminars/conferences. Therapists generally want to hear from other therapists. See NYSCCC conference brochures for ideas.
- 2) Sponsor a local therapist or school district social worker (who agrees to educate colleagues to attend the Hunter College or Hillside Family of Agencies adoption certification programs (see resources handout #8)

**Refer to/Discuss:**

Handout #12 – Fundraising Tips for Soliciting Donations from Local Businesses and Organizations

## **F. Thoughts on Educating Ourselves and Others**

- 1) "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." *James Madison*
- 2) "There is nothing training cannot do. Nothing is above its reach. It can turn bad morals to good; it can destroy bad principles and recreate good ones; it can lift men to angelship." *Mark Twain*
- 3) "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of man, - the balance-wheel of the social machinery." *Horace Mann*
- 4) "The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you." *B.B. King*
- 5) "They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel." *Carl W. Buechner*
- 6) "We need the ability to unlearn what we know." Anonymous
- 7) "There is not use trying," said Alice; "One can't believe impossible things." "I dare say you haven't had much practice." Said the Queen. "When I was your age. I always did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I've believed as much as six impossible things before breakfast." *Lewis Carroll*
- 8) "Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another." *Walter Elliott*
- 9) "Never give up your dream because of the time it will take to accomplish it. The time will pass anyway." *H. Jackson Brown Jr.*



## **Educating Others About Adoption and Foster Care: Tools for Families**

### **NYSCCC Training Curriculum Workshop Handouts**

- 1) The Seven Core Issues of Adoption
- 2) The Realities of Adoption
- 3) Adoptive Families are Different
- 4) Adoption and the School Issues Factsheet for Families
- 5) A Child's Point of View on Foster Care
- 6) Adoptive Families and Professionals: When Experts Make Things Worse
- 7) 20 Things parents wish Providers Knew and Would Remember
- 8) Resources for Educating Others about the Realities of Adoption and Foster Care
- 9) Communication Emergency Kit
- 10) Expressing Yourself Clearly and Completely
- 11) The Great Back to School Adoption Kit
- 12) Fundraising Tips for Soliciting Donations



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## **Seven Core Issues of Adoption**

The parent and child in an adoptive family have an unshared genetic and social history that professionals must take into account when planning intervention strategies. The most helpful therapists and experts are those who understand the seven core issues of adoption and know that they resurface often in the lives of any member of the adoption triad. The following information has been adapted from the work of Deborah N. Silverstein and Sharon Kaplan. Although their work specifically relates to adoption, much of the information can also be applied to foster children.

1. **Loss.** Adopted children mourn the loss of their birth parents, even when they are happy with their adoptive family. Their loss can feel more prominent at various developmental stages, but especially as a teenager or young adult.
2. **Rejection.** Adopted children often feel rejected by their birth parents and subsequently avoid situations where they might be rejected or provoke others to reject them to validate their negative self-perceptions.
3. **Guilt/Shame.** Adopted children often believe there is something intrinsically wrong with them and that they deserved to lose their birth parents, which causes them to feel guilt and shame.
4. **Grief.** There is no ritual to grieve the loss of a birth parent. Suppressed or delayed grief can cause depression, substance abuse, or aggressive behaviors.
5. **Identity.** Adopted children often feel incomplete and at a loss regarding their identity because of gaps in their genetic and family history.
6. **Intimacy.** Many adopted children—especially those with multiple placements or histories of abuse—have difficulty attaching to members of their new family. Early life experiences may affect an adopted child's ability to form an intimate relationship.
7. **Mastery and Control.** Adopted children sometimes engage in power struggles with their adoptive parents or other authority figures in an attempt to master the loss of control they experienced in adoption.

*Source: North American Council for Adoptable Children*



**NYS Citizens'  
Coalition for Children**

**THE INVISIBLE REALITIES OF ADOPTION**

*Source: Family Focus Adoption Services, Inc. Staff  
718 -224-1919 • www.familyfocusadoption.org*

**ABANDONMENT - THE COMMON EXPERIENCE**

What all of our kids have in common - all of the kids available for adoption - is the experience of abandonment. Abandonment is a subjective experience - that is, I can think I have been abandoned when I really haven't been. There are good reasons for some parents to give up their children. Jews, who gave their children to Christians to be raised during World War 11, certainly loved their children. Still, those children may well have experienced themselves as having been abandoned.

If we live long enough, all of us will be abandoned. By ninety years old, even our own children may be dead. But by that age, we have the experiences, wisdom, strength, and memories to help us cope with the abandonment experience. Our kids have been abandoned before having any of that; our kids are often abandoned at an age so young that they don't even have words yet.

But it wouldn't necessarily matter if they did, because there are no words in the English language to adequately describe the experience of abandonment. The closest experience that we have been able to figure out is the experience of war veterans or Holocaust survivors. And those people are notorious for not speaking of their experience, or for speaking of it only with others who share the experience.

So what do our kids do with this experience of abandonment? Until, and unless, they are adopted, they can't do anything with it. Adoption ends the experience of being abandoned, but the effects of the abandonment still remain.

And what are those effects? What does an abandoned person feel? They feel alone, they feel angry, they feel frustrated, and they feel scared. But most of all, they feel crazy. They have experienced something that no one else seems to have experienced; they hear no words to describe what they have experienced. Here is the most intense experience they have ever undergone with these incredibly powerful effects inside them; and everyone acts as though nothing much has happened. That contradiction between what they experience inside, and what is reflected back to them from the outside, must be resolved. Adoption, and adoption alone, for a child offers them that opportunity to resolve it.

**INDUCEMENT: THE LANGUAGE OF THE ABANDONED**

What is it that kids feel, as a result of their abandonment? Alone! Angry! Sad! Mad! Crazy! Intensely before all those words - intensely alone, intensely angry, intensely sad, intensely mad, and intensely crazy. Fortunately, words are not the only means of human communication. Psychologists have taught us that there is an alternative means of communication for people that requires no words. They call it "inducement." We call it probably the most important concept that there is to give to our families. All it means is that I can communicate my feelings to you without using words, by setting up a situation that induces some measure of those feelings within you. And what are those feelings that I am trying to communicate? - pain, fear, hopelessness

aloneness, helplessness, and number one and above all - craziness. Anyone working in the field with people who have adopted must have heard parents complaining that they are feeling these things as a result of what their children are doing.

Inducement is a human means of communication: we all do it to a greater or lesser extent. The difference with our kids is that the feelings they induce are the feelings that are produced when one is abandoned. And there are two qualities that all of those feelings share - they are intense and they feel bad.

So the kids communicate their feelings that came about from their abandonment experience to their adoptive parents. Communicating their feelings is good. Communicating their feelings is evidence that the adoption has been a success: the child has accepted that their adoptive parents are their real parents. And how does that success often look? Very bad. How does it feel? Very bad. CPS workers must take note here.

What is the purpose of the inducement? Is it just to communicate how the kids feel to their parents? No. Like all unconsciously motivated behavior, it has more than one purpose. And the biggest purpose is a cry for help to the parents. The kids induce these terribly painful feelings inside the adults, (although it is perhaps only actually some small fraction of what the kids feel) and then they sit back and watch what the parents do with what are now THEIR feelings. If you, (*an adult*) can't handle your feelings without acting out, then what chance do I, (*a kid*) have to handle mine?

And what is the worse thing that the parent can do at that point? Blame the kid. Holding the kid accountable for his or her behavior makes the kid feel safe. Blaming the kid for how the parent feels has a kernel of truth to it - the kid is doing what he does purposefully; he does do it deliberately - albeit most times, but not always, unconsciously. But nobody - look to what psychology teaches us again - nobody is responsible for how I feel, except me.

If - as sometimes happens - the parents, or the workers, or the therapists, or the schools, or CPS -use the acting out on the part of the kids, (the inducement motivated behavior on the part of the kids) to decide that the adoption is a failure, they are doing **exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time**. And they are feeding the confusion and feeling of craziness within the child.

### **ADOPTION TRANSFERENCE - THE PERFECTION OF BLAMING**

Adoption Transference is a variation on a concept that was initiated by psychologists. We built upon that core concept in an attempt to understand a phenomenon we witnessed repeatedly among adopted children when they became adolescents. Those kids seemed to blame their adoptive parents for things that had occurred to them prior to the adoptive parents even meeting the kids. It made no sense, yet the kids seemed adamant in their certainty.

How, we wondered, could the kids possibly blame people for things that had happened prior to even meeting the people? From one perspective, it made some sense: children blame their parents for lots of things. We remained stuck for a while. Until one day one of our workers said, "What if there was no such thing as time? Then there would be no before, no after, no cause, no effect?"

And that freed us to understand this very strong phenomenon: from the viewpoint of the children, the job of their parents is to protect them. Yet, their (adoptive) parents did not protect them from all their abandonment experiences prior to their adoptions. Eliminating time made this make

sense. The adoptive parents did not do their job - that they weren't the parents at that point is irrelevant.

What it meant - we realized - is that adoption transference - blaming the parents for all the bad things in a kid's life even prior to his adoption - meant that the adoption was a success. The kids, after all, were accepting their adoptive parents as their PARENTS. It didn't feel very successful - but the adoption was a success.

The problem was that the kids are not stupid. They know that time does exist. They know that their parents are not to blame for stuff that happened pre-adoption. Yet the feelings inside - the transference - is very real also. The combination reinforces and feeds the child's constant sense that he is crazy.

Why do kids do this? There are a number of theories, but none are definitive. There seems to be some human need to blame other people for bad things that happen to us, and we assume that it is related to that. But we can't be ultimately certain. What we do know is that it is real and the adoptive parents must accept it as real in order for the kids to transcend it.

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# Adoptive Families Are Different

*By: Judith Ashton*

Adoptive families are indeed different. Assuredly, they are not less-than, nor second-best, but they are different from families created by birth. The National Consortium for Post Legal Adoption Services, with input from adoptive parents and professionals throughout the country, pinpointed eight areas of difference:

- **Mastery or Control** – Family building through adoption is controlled by other people or circumstances outside an adoptive family's control, thwarting most people's efforts to maintain mastery over their environments and lives. Would-be parents are "studied" before they are "approved" for adoption, and agencies and courts have authority to determine the family's destiny for a period of time.
- **Entitlement** - Both legal entitlement, determined by the court's consent to adoption, and emotional entitlement, which develops over time, impact the adoptive family's belief in their "right" to each other.
- **Claiming** - This process, which leads to adoptive family members' full acceptance of one another, is complicated by older children's remembrances of earlier families.
- **Unmatched Expectations** - Often at the heart of the instability that some adoptive families experience, unmatched expectations need to be addressed and clarified, bringing about changes where needed.
- **Family Integration** - Adoptive families are challenged by the complexities of blending past experiences -- the child's from biological and other family ties, and the adoptive family's from times before adoption -- into ways of functioning which serve the new family unit.
- **Separation, Loss, and Grief** - The emotional losses of adoption have lifelong implications. An article in a NACAC publication describes the losses: [Adoption] is a profound experience in which every member of the triad has lost something, which makes adoption a unique phenomenon in our society. Birth parent has lost a child, whether termination of parental rights was voluntary or court-ordered. Child has lost his genetic family, his chance to "be just like everybody else..." And the adoptive family has lost the fantasy child that might have been born to them and who would carry a genetic link.
- **Attachment** - Adoptive families need to incorporate their children's past histories and experiences into solid new relationships of trust and positive interdependency, which directly affect how an individual views the world.
- **Identity Formation** - The development of positive self-identities for both adoptive parents and adoptees is challenged by the unique circumstances of adoption, with an adoptee needing to incorporate the genetic connections to another family and the experiential connections to the adoptive family, and the adoptive parents incorporating a family member not genetically related to them.

Every adoptive family experiences, and is affected by, these differences. The issues the differences raise emerge and re-emerge as all family members go through life's developmental stages. Children who have experienced traumatic abuse, neglect, multiple placements and different caregivers bring additional issues, compounding the challenges faced by all adoptive families.

Clearly adoptive families cannot be expected to "go it alone." They can benefit from, and must have available, a variety of services which are specific to their individual needs and circumstances and which are responsive to changing needs over time.

*Source: Judith Ashton, former Executive Director, NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children, 607-272-0034. [www.nysccc.org](http://www.nysccc.org). Reprinted with permission of the author.*



## Adoption and School Issues



Like all children, adopted children spend a good portion of their waking hours in school. Because school is such an important aspect of children's lives, adoptive parents, like all parents, want their child's school experience to be a positive one. When your child has a problem at school, you might find yourself wondering: Is this a problem related to adoption, or is it a "generic" develop-

### What's Inside:

- How adoption impacts children at school
- Preschool/kindergarten
- Elementary school
- Junior and senior high school
- Specific educational concerns
- Learning lag, learning problem, or learning disability?
- Increasing the adoption sensitivity of school personnel
- Using positive adoption language



mental, educational, or school system problem common to all children?

This factsheet will look at three areas. The first is how adoption impacts a youngster in school. We will discuss if, when, how, and why to talk about adoption with school personnel. Second, we will examine some specific educational problems that are common to adopted children and how to advocate for the educational and support services that they might need. Third, we will suggest ways to help students, teachers, principals, and other school personnel to become more sensitive to adoption issues.

At the end of this factsheet there is an information sheet on positive adoption language that can be given to school personnel. For additional resources, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway website at [www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov).

## How Adoption Impacts Children at School

Adoption can impact children at school in two ways: educationally and socially. If a child is grieving for or fantasizing about birth family to the extent that it affects his ability to concentrate and learn, that is an educational effect. If a child is teased on the playground by classmates who say that he must be bad because his “real” parents gave him away, that is a social effect. Yet the teasing can also affect self-esteem, which can affect school performance. Let’s look at both of these areas in three general time periods: preschool and kindergarten, elementary school, and junior-senior high school.

## Preschool/Kindergarten

When children attend day care or nursery school, they are exposed to many new experiences beyond the protected world of their immediate family. Often it is the first time they interact socially with a group of children. They make new friends, learn to deal with a new authority figure (the teacher), master routines, sing songs, pet a guinea pig, and imitate adult roles in a housekeeping area just their size.

Educational goals for preschool children are normally low-key. Supporting the development of the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence in the world beyond the family is usually the priority. Social skills such as taking turns, sharing, and following directions are emphasized. Gross motor development and creative expression are encouraged. Activities may center around colors, shapes, number concepts, and letters, among other things, but formal drilling in reading readiness or arithmetic facts is usually not a part of the curriculum. Most preschools want to help children gain self-awareness and a love of learning that will be a good foundation for their elementary school experience.

Children who are 3 or 4 years old and were adopted as infants or toddlers rarely show any adoption-related adjustment problems. Since they do not fully understand reproduction yet, they cannot really understand what adoption means. They may blissfully tell and retell the story of their adoption to anyone who will listen. Preschool children do not have prejudices about skin color (unless they are actively taught to have

it by their parents or other adults) and are usually accepting of all children who behave in a friendly way towards them. Transracially and transculturally adopted children, therefore, probably won't experience prejudice during this time. However, children this age are aware of differences in physical features and may need some help to understand them.

Whether to tell the preschool staff that your child was adopted is a question with no absolute answer. If your child was transracially adopted, the topic will come up automatically. If there is a request to bring in a newborn photo for a bulletin board and you adopted your child at age 6 months, it will come up then as well. Claudia Jewett Jarratt, a Boston-area family therapist for 25 years and adoptive mother of seven children, suggests that telling or not telling the school about adoption is an individual matter. Says Jarratt, "You do what makes your child feel loved and affirmed in all areas of adoption." If you do tell, it is certainly not necessary to share all the details of the birth family's situation.

Since preschools and day care centers are often private and separate from the public school system, the preschool years are a good time for adoptive parents to practice interacting with school personnel about adoption issues without the fear that any labels will necessarily follow their child throughout his school career. Parents can start to get comfortable with the idea of sharing information about the child's adoption if they feel it is appropriate or that it can help the child's adjustment to school.

If the children and teachers in your child's class at preschool seem curious about adop-

tion, you might want to make a classroom presentation. If so, you should emphasize that adoption is one of the many ways that families are formed. Lois Melina, an Idaho-based adoptive parent and author of several books on adoption, says the following points are appropriate for the preschool years:

- There are different types of families.
- People who live together and care about each other are a family.
- Sometimes members of a family do not live together but they still care about each other.

Kindergartners have some understanding of reproduction, although Melina says they are probably more interested in how babies are born than in how they are conceived. A detailed discussion of reproduction would probably not be appropriate for a kindergarten class. However, you probably could say that every baby grows inside a woman and that after the baby is born, the child may live with the woman who gave birth to him, or he may live with other parents.

## Elementary School

First grade is when "real school" begins. Six-year-olds have reached the age when they can be required to sit still, pay attention, maintain order in line, and learn to read and write. They gain a new sense of independence and assurance as they ride to school on the bus alone, negotiate the cafeteria, receive a report card, and perform in the school pageant. They also begin to participate in group activities outside of

school such as the soccer team, cub scouts, or ballet lessons—that help them to develop a variety of new skills.

At this age, adopted children begin to be able to grasp the fuller meaning of their adoption, including the loss and abandonment issues that may be associated with it. They may spend time fantasizing about their birthparents and wondering what they are like. They may feel that they were placed for adoption because they were not good, pretty, or smart enough to be kept. With mental energy tied up in these concerns, children can find it difficult to pay attention in class and to learn their lessons, even if they do not have learning disabilities. And because this is the first time that more intense educational demands are placed on the child, if a child does have a learning disability or a specific condition such as attention deficit disorder, this is when it may surface.

Children in elementary school are old enough to decide for themselves whether to tell their classmates about their adoption. They must be taught, however, that once they tell, they will not be able to “take it back.” Also, you need to help your child recognize that people have different reactions to this information. You must give him the tools to respond to these reactions, especially if they are negative (see the Information Gateway factsheet *Explaining Adoption to Your Children, Family and Friends*).

Your experience with preschool teachers may help you decide whether to share adoption information with gradeschool personnel. If you feel it is important to discuss adoption with your child’s teacher, tell your child exactly what you will be talking about

and why. Good opportunities for adoption discussions are at the very beginning of the school year, at parent-teacher conferences, and on back-to-school night.

Some professionals and adoptive parents think it is unwise to share adoption information with teachers because they fear teachers will single out their children, make them feel different, or cause them to be made fun of, called names, or given special treatment. Others say that parents cannot expect teachers to become more sensitive to adoption issues, use positive adoption language, and help adopted children feel more secure if parents are not willing to share openly and affirm their own positive feelings about adoption.

Linda Yellin, an adult adoptee, therapist, and consultant from the Detroit area who specializes in pre and post adoption services, believes in most cases it is useful to share information about certain aspects of adoption with appropriate school personnel. Regarding preschoolers and elementary school age children she states, “With the increase in openness in adoption practice, it is helpful for school personnel to understand that some adopted children continue to have contact with their siblings, former foster families, and in some cases, with birthparents and extended birth family members. If school personnel are aware and sensitive to these situations, they are more apt to respond appropriately.”

### **Children Adopted From the Foster Care System**

A child who is newly adopted from the foster care system at age 6 will have some of the same school issues as a 6-year-old

adopted as an infant. He will be dealing with the grief and loss that all children living away from their birthparents deal with. He may also have some other difficulties. If he experienced abuse or neglect and more than one caretaker, he may not have received the emotional nurturing he required at a younger age. Interruptions in attachment, early deprivations, cultural differences, and moves can cause a child to act younger than he is. He may not be able to learn as fast as children his own age; and yet, if he is physically the same size as his classmates, he will be expected to perform at the same level as everyone else. These negative experiences may also cause a child to have low self-esteem, problems with authority, difficulties in getting along with other children, depression, or antisocial behavior, such as lying, stealing, or disrupting class.

A parent of a child adopted from the foster care system almost has to discuss the child's adoption with school personnel, so that they will understand these background factors and be able to plan useful interventions together with the adoptive family.

If your child has the potential to have some serious school problems because of his former birth family or foster care system experiences, you need to get school personnel to become a part of the problem-solving team with you, along with your child's social worker, former foster families, and other key players that you determine. To enlist their support, you should share relevant information about your child's background; however, you should be cautious in how much detail you provide, and to whom. There is no need to talk about the specifics of the abuse, for instance, or to reveal who the perpetrator was. The level of

detail provided to a therapist or counselor is different from that provided to a teacher. The teacher needs to know just enough history so that he or she can understand some of the reasons for the child's current functioning in the classroom.

When you share this information, you should tell the teacher that you expect the information to be treated as a professional confidence. It is not to be shared freely with anyone who does not have a need to know.

If you think your child will need services not normally provided in the regular classroom, you need to advocate for those services. Unlike past adults in his life who were not trustworthy and who did not work as a team on his behalf, you and school personnel must work together. Your child needs to get the message: "You are important. We can make this work."

It also might be necessary for your family to seek other postadoption services along with the school-provided educational services, such as psychotherapy or association with other adoptive families in an adoptive parent support group. For more information on this, see the Information Gateway factsheet on postadoption services at [www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_after/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_after/index.cfm).

### **School Assignments Related to Adoption**

In many elementary schools, third or fourth graders are asked to make a family tree. You can help ease the possible uncomfortable feelings that your child might have about this assignment by talking with the teacher about the child's adoption ahead of time. If you have enough information about the birth family, perhaps your child's family

tree can include information about both the birth family and the adoptive family. Lois Melina, in “Making a Family Tree Helpful for Adopted Child,” points out the benefits to adopted children that such an assignment can provide. It is a natural opportunity to talk about adoption with your child.

In the 1990’s there are many varieties of families. Children nowadays can live with adoptive parents, foster parents, one parent, divorced parents with joint custody, stepparents, grandparents, or two parents of the same gender. Most teachers in this day and age are aware of these differences. Hopefully they will take the opportunity to point out that each type of family is a “real” family, and that no one type is better than the other. You might suggest to the teacher to emphasize to the children that while families may look different on the outside, on the inside they are all the same—they are made up of people who care for and love one another. If handled in this way, the assignment should be a self-esteem builder for your child and all the children in your child’s class.

Elementary school may also be the time when a teacher suggests what he or she thinks is an innocent-sounding science or social studies project for the class to undertake—adopt a whale, zoo animal, redwood tree or highway. While the intent is to impart positive messages about the need for all of us to take responsibility for saving endangered species and improving our environment, this kind of project can have negative effects on adopted children of this age.

These types of projects may lead school-age adopted children to conclude (because they

are still concrete and not abstract thinkers) that all you have to do to adopt is pay some money. Adoptions of whales and redwoods must be renewed every year. Do their parents have to pay more money every year to keep them? And if their parents do not pay the money, will they be thrown out? You might need to mention to your child’s teacher that the project is fine, but that the phrase “adopt-a-” is problematic. Such a project may require some sensitive explanation on the teacher’s part to a class containing adopted children.

If your child is comfortable with the idea, presentations on transculturally adopted children’s countries of origin are often well received by children of this age and their teachers. Slides, photographs, crafts, traditional clothes, and foods are particularly enjoyable. This type of presentation can sometimes be worked into social studies units, particularly in schools where there is already a multicultural population. Activities that are aimed at eliminating cultural stereotypes and getting children to see that we are a diverse global community where people have many differences as well as similarities are also useful.

## Junior and Senior High School

Educational and social demands are much greater on youngsters in junior or senior high school. There are different teachers for each subject, rather than one dependable teacher to report to, and each one has different expectations. School assignments are longer and more complex, and exams are

harder. The school itself is much larger, and the number of kids can be overwhelming. There are lockers and gym class, clubs to join, and cliques to figure out. Messages and music from the popular culture and media bombard the youngster. And with all of this, hormones are raging and causing all kinds of bodily and emotional changes.

Since teenagers are more capable of abstract thinking, adoption discussions in school can be more sophisticated. Teenagers know how a girl gets pregnant, and can understand why someone might not be able to care for a baby after it is born. They can also understand the concepts of child abuse and neglect, and that society has an obligation to protect children and provide a safe and secure environment for them. All this being said, adopted teens still may not have worked through all their feelings about their adoption. Precisely because they have more understanding, and because this is a time when sexuality and identity issues surface, their adoptive status may cause them to feel even more embarrassed or rejected than when they were younger. Teenagers sometimes render harsh value judgments about themselves, seeing only the black and white and none of the grey areas. You may still need to help school personnel see that adoption affects adopted children's performance and adjustment at school even when they reach junior high or high school age.

Discussions about adoption at the junior high and high school level fit in well in a family life, health, home economics, or sex education class. Lois Melina suggests that a panel consisting of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted teens makes a good presentation for teens. The birthparents and adoptive parents talk about why they

decided on adoption and their feelings and experiences. The adopted teens talk about their feelings and experiences about being adopted, hopefully in a positive manner, while realistically discussing the special issues they have to deal with.

How do adopted kids in this age group do in school? Well, there is good news. According to a recent national survey conducted by the Search Institute of Minneapolis, Minnesota, out of 4,600 adopted teenagers in the United States, 56 percent say they like school, and 20 percent "aren't sure." These percentages are not much different than those of nonadopted teens (54 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Two out of three adopted teens say they try as hard as they can to do their best in school, and three out of four say they plan to finish high school and go to college. Adoptive parents ask about homework and curriculum, help with homework, and attend meetings at school at the same rate as other parents. Thus, despite our worries, and even though some adopted teens struggle because of learning disabilities, school is a positive experience for most of them.

One cautionary note, however, is that this survey focused on teens who were adopted as infants or young children. If the survey included more young people adopted at a later age and as a result of birthparent abuse or neglect and placement in the foster care system, the results might be different. Just because one study finds that adopted kids do okay in high school does not mean that you can sit back and do nothing. The repercussions of adoption can last a long time, and as conscientious parents, you still need to stay involved.

## Specific Educational Concerns

A number of articles have been written over the years saying that adopted children are more likely than nonadopted children to have learning disabilities, particularly attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity (see bibliography). It is not within the scope of this factsheet to try to help you diagnose whether your child has a learning disability. The subject is so complex, and there are many other resources available to inform you about them—your local school district, the State board of education, and national support groups on specific disabilities are a few. For the names and addresses of some support groups for parents of children having developmental and/or learning disabilities, read the Information Gateway's factsheet *Adopting Children With Developmental Disabilities*.

It is within the scope of this factsheet, however, to discuss why experts believe adopted children are diagnosed with learning disabilities at a higher rate than non-adopted children, in order to help you help your child if he is so diagnosed.

One theory explaining why adopted children are diagnosed with more learning disabilities is the genetic component, that is, people who choose adoption for their children or whose parental rights are terminated may themselves have learning problems. Another contributing factor may be the prenatal environment of the child. If a child's birthmother did not have adequate nutrition, or if she drank alcohol, took drugs, or smoked cigarettes during her

pregnancy, these environmental influences may have some effect. Abuse or neglect, if it caused physical injury, neurological damage, or emotional distress can also play a role in producing learning disabilities.

Another contributing factor may be that adoptive parents tend to be extremely watchful of their children. If a child shows the slightest sign of a problem, they tend to seek professional help; thus, adopted children may simply be diagnosed as having learning problems sooner than other children.

## Learning Lag, Learning Problem, or Learning Disability?

For a child to have a "learning disability," specific criteria have to be met. Tests have to be administered and results examined to determine this. Not every learning problem or learning lag is a learning disability. It is important that a complete assessment, including a physical examination, be obtained to get an accurate diagnosis.

Poor school performance certainly is not always due to a learning disability. First, it is normal for children to have a bad day once in a while. Second, there could be many reasons for poor school performance. Maybe your child needs glasses and is not able to see the blackboard. Perhaps he is worrying about an adoption issue or a personal or family problem. In this case, psychotherapy with an adoption-knowledgeable therapist may help to resolve it in his mind so he can settle down to learn. Or your child

may have a true attention deficit disorder that can be treated with medication and helped with some extra structure that a knowledgeable teacher provides. Your child may be able to stay in a regular classroom but in a lower grade. “Special ed” is not always needed.

As parents, adoptive or biological, you also have to be realistic. Your child’s intellectual ability may simply not be at the level you expected. You may need to learn to accept your child as he is, and not expect a level of school performance that is unachievable. The most any parent can expect is for his/her child to perform at the highest level of which he is capable.

If your child does not qualify for special educational services, you may still want him placed in the setting most conducive to meeting his needs. The best setting may be a smaller class, a class where the teacher is more knowledgeable about your child’s particular needs, or a different school. A tutor may need to be involved, or a speech therapist, or a combination of helpers. The most important thing is to get everyone involved to work together to help the child succeed.

Your job as a conscientious parent is to know your child well enough to get a realistic picture of his potential, interests, and motivation for performing in school. You are the one most able to note patterns and changes in your child’s behavior. Then it is your responsibility to communicate with the school if you think some type of intervention may be necessary. Consult experts. Consult other parents. Ultimately, however, you must rely on your own instincts as to what is best for your child.

Remember that just because your child was adopted it does not mean that he will have problems at school. And if your child does have learning problems, they may have nothing to do with his being adopted. In either case, it helps to be informed and ready to act if problems do arise.

## Increasing the Adoption Sensitivity of School Personnel

There are several ways that you can work to increase the sensitivity of school personnel to adoption issues. Maybe you will not be able to accomplish all of these, but hopefully you can achieve some.

Encourage principals, counselors, and teachers to use positive adoption language. To use it, they have to know it. Photocopy the information sheet on page 8 of this fact-sheet and give it to as many school personnel as you can.

Donate a book about adoption to your school’s library. If your child was adopted from another country, donate a book about the culture of that country. Round up other adoptive parents of children from other countries and have them do the same. Suggest other adoption-related titles for the school’s librarian to include in the next order of new books. Bibliographies on books about adoption for children of different ages are available from Information Gateway and a number of other national adoption organizations. The National Adoption Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Adoptive Families of America in St. Paul, Minnesota, and

the North American Council on Adoptable Children in St. Paul, Minnesota, are just a few organizations that can provide this kind of help.

Make a presentation about adoption to your child's class or to teachers at a faculty meeting, but think carefully about the messages you want to get across. Perhaps you will want to work in tandem with an experienced adoption worker from a local agency. If the principal wants to know why a presentation on adoption is relevant when only a few children in the school are adopted, point out the similarities between adoption issues and many other kinds of loss issues that children experience.

Provide school personnel with information about adoption conferences being held in your community that are open to the public. Or plan your own! Carol Dolber McMurray, a consultant in Richmond, Virginia (see "Resources" below), was able to develop a full-day workshop about adoption for a Virginia school system's staff development department that educated school personnel system-wide. She then developed a similar course for college students pursuing a degree in education. Imagine what an impact that is making!

Some schools already have support groups for children whose parents are divorced. Suggest the formation of a support group for adopted children and a person to facilitate it.

Volunteer for the family life education curriculum review committee. Make sure that positive adoption messages get into the curriculum.

The staff members at Information Gateway and other national adoption organizations

are prepared to help you by disseminating information on adoption to your school system upon request. Feel free to use all of us to help educate your child's educators.

## Using Positive Adoption Language

The words we choose say a lot about how we really think. Using positive adoption language (PAL) means choosing words that show respect for birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. When we use PAL, we say that adoption is a valid way to form a family, just as birth is. Both are important, but one is not better than the other.

### When Describing Family Relationships

*Use terms such as:*

"birthparent," "birthmother," and "birthfather" to describe the man and woman who conceived and gave birth to the child. All of us have birthparents, however, not all of us live in their custody.

"parent," "mother," "father," "mommy," "daddy," and "child" to describe the members of the adoptive family. It is not necessary to say "adopted child" or "adoptive parent" unless the situation specifically centers on adoption.

*Avoid terms such as:*

"real parent," "real mother," "real father," and "real family"—these terms imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and temporary.

“natural parent,” “natural child,” and “one of your own”—these terms imply that because they are not blood-related, the relationships in an adoptive family are not as strong or lasting as relationships by birth.

### **When Describing the Adoption Process**

*Use terms such as:*

“make an adoption plan” or “choose adoption”—these terms acknowledge that the birthparents were responsible and in control of their decision.

“parent her child”—when a birthparent decides not to choose adoption.

*Avoid terms such as:*

“abandoned,” “surrendered,” “released,” “relinquished,” “gave up for adoption,” “adopted out,” or “put up for adoption.”

“keep her child”—this implies the child is a possession and ignores the responsibilities of parenting.

For more information on PAL, contact Adoptive Families of America, 2309 Como Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108, 612.535.4829 or 800.372.3300; or Patricia Irwin Johnston at Perspectives Press, P.O. Box 90318, Indianapolis, IN 46290-0318, 317.872.3055. Ms. Johnston also has a free article about programs that use “adopt” in the title (such as “adopt a whale” or “adopt a highway”) called “Adopt-A-Confusion.”

*Written by Debra G. Smith, National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 1993.*



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## A Child's Point of View on Foster Care and Adoption

So, are you wondering what I need? Are you wondering what I would do about all of this if I had the power?

**First of all**, it would help if you would start with one simple, clear commandment to yourself. Never forget that I am watching. Never forget that every single thing you do matters immensely to me (even when I work like crazy to make you think that it does not). And I will remember. You may be able to get away with treating me as if I am invisible for a while (perhaps long enough to "disrupt" me or move yourself to a different casework job). But in your heart of hearts you know I was there, watching. I was having deep feelings about what was happening to me and I needed some one to act if it mattered, hugely.

**Second**, don't imagine that I will ever stop yearning for my birth family (even though, as in other things, I will pretend otherwise). Help me find some way to keep a connection with them, even if I never see them again. Bring out pictures, or a life book, and hold me while I rage or sob or stare or all of these at once. And understand that none of this is a reflection on you. Don't be surprised when I come back from a visit with them peeing in my pants or throwing tantrums in the bath that night. I told you things matter to me. So I am going to have feelings about things that matter to me.

**Third**, it would help a lot if you would make the decisions that you need to make and stick with them. Some days I think my mind is going to explode because I know something is going on in my life but I can't tell what it is; later I'll learn that there was a court hearing that day and everybody in my life was wrought up and then it was, "continued" (whatever that means, except mostly, that nothing is getting decided and I still don't have a family). I don't get to make the decisions. You do. So have the courage to make them so that I can get a life.

**Fourth**, it would mean a lot to me if you would take good care of my foster family. They have their hands full. Sometime they don't know what to do with me. So make sure someone is there to answer their questions, to encourage them, to help them understand me better. You won't like what will happen if I keep getting disrupted, and the only way I can think of to prevent that is to take extra care of the people that are taking care of me.

So have I told you anything that you wanted to know? Have I helped you understand how all of us feel who fell into this rabbit hole that is the world of foster care and adoption?

**Source:** *National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice newsletter: Best Practice, Next Practice, Summer 2003. Adapted from Multiple Transitions: A young child's point of view on foster care and adoption.*



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## **Adoptive Families and Professionals: When the Experts Make Things Worse**

By Steven L. Nickman, MD, and Robert G. Lewis, MEd, MSW

*From the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, June 1994.*

*Reprinted by permission of Robert C. Lewis*

Adoptive parents often experience contact with professionals as more damaging than helpful. This is seen in most dramatic form when families are in turmoil during the adolescence of a later-adopted child. However, some adopters of infants also report problems in their relations with professionals.

Difficulties can be described under four main headings:

*Failure To Be Aware of the Basic Categories of Child Placement and the Distinctions between Them.* Some professionals do not understand the important distinctions between foster care and adoption, or among the several varieties of adoption (e.g., early and later placement, closed and open arrangements, subsidized and non-subsidized adoptions). Without thoughtful consideration of the timing and quality of attachment, clinicians' interventions are not well framed, and parents feel misunderstood.

*Failure To Recognize and Support Existing Bonds at Times of Family Stress.* Adopted adolescents demonstrate their confusion about identity and family membership by dramatic behavior that brings the family to professional attention. At such times feelings run high, and a degree of alienation may be seen between child and parent that confuses and troubles the professionals involved. When faced with parents and an adopted teenager who are intensely conflicted, clinicians may have trouble maintaining a nonjudgmental stance; they may overlook the possibly transient nature of the crisis. Stressed by the painful affects and deep ambivalence of family members, they may wish to intervene actively to "rescue" someone and end the distress they are witnessing. An unattuned psychiatrist, state social worker, or judge may thus simplify the task as saving the "good" parents from the "bad" adolescent, or vice versa. In either case, intervention may contribute to family disruption since the end result is often a weakening of the adoptive placement itself, notwithstanding that the child is a legal member of the family and that this membership may be the best hope of a troubled child.

Creative ways of "parenting at a distance" that are often useful temporary solutions to conflict (boarding school, residential treatment, or temporary placement with a relative or friend) are less likely to be recommended to adoptive families; instead there may be state intrusion and entry (reentry) into the foster care system. Parents who recognize a need for residential treatment may be told that foster placement is more appropriate or that they must abandon the child to state custody to obtain funding for residential care. Parents thus become effectively excluded from planning for their child.

Juvenile court judges may react impulsively to an adolescent's acting-out behavior. One judge told a boy's parents, "You shouldn't have adopted this boy," and quietly added a profane remark disparaging the adoptive father's judgment. Another judge was angered by an adolescent's cocky, provocative talk. Ignoring evidence that this was a direct effect of a loyalty conflict (*H. Leichtman Personal Communication*), he abruptly rescinded the adoption, which had been in force for 16 years, evidently trying to relieve parental distress. In both cases the parents were confused and angry that the judge, failing to recognize their family unit, had instead undermined it.

Similar lapses occur frequently in adolescent inpatient units. Adoptive families in crisis are vulnerable when unsupported by professionals and institutions whose protection they have a right to expect (Lewis et al., 1975). Professionals' intolerance of less-than-optimal bonds suggests that adoptive families—particularly those with special needs—are stigmatized or deemed inferior.

*Inappropriate Intrusions into Family Life.* Adoptive families encounter a variety of intrusions, ranging from stigmatizing questions asked by schools to the unjustified removal of a child from a family. Parents may be asked routinely on enrollment forms whether their child was adopted; classroom teachers may fail to make provision for adoptees in their handling of the common but often insensitive “family tree” assignment.

More harmful intrusion is seen in the following not uncommon situation: A family adopted a young school-age boy after abuse and several foster placements. After a “honeymoon” period, the child predictably began testing limits severely. The parents managed to contain him by firm handling, including occasional mild physical punishment. The boy gradually settled into the family and attained school and peer success. After an incident of punishment, remembering his past and confusing his present parents' motives with the questionable motives of his biological parents, the child alerted the authorities to the “fact” that he had been abused. The parents explained that their methods had led to improvement and that the boy's history predisposed him to distort events. The protective agency, defining abuse rigidly, continued to monitor the parents, who now question whether they can continue without the support of community authorities. Although legally adopted, this child's placement is now in jeopardy. Abuse can occur in adoptive families, but recognizing genuine abuse in previously traumatized children requires still and specific training.

*Failure To Provide Appropriate Psychotherapy.* A common complaint of parents adopting children with complex histories is that therapists do not understand the nature of the relationship between themselves and the child and do not appreciate the dilemma of the child who is trying to establish new loyalties. The problem of multiple emotional attachments (*H. Leichtman, personal communication; Fishman, 1992*) is particularly dramatic when the child remembers the biological parents or when an open adoption arrangement specifies ongoing contact.

Problems tend to fall into two types. The therapist may work almost entirely the child and keep the parents on the periphery. The adoptive parents, aware of the child's traumatically based tendency to lie or misrepresent, believe the therapist cannot succeed without a clear picture of what actually happens at home, or school, and with peers. Or the therapist may do only conjoint family therapy and scrutinize only the ongoing interactions of the family, not recognizing that much of the force behind the child's symptoms and complaints derives from events that occurred in a prior situation. Parents may thus feel scapegoated by the child and therapist together.

## **DISCUSSION**

The propensity of adopted adolescents to tax their parents' resources has long been recognized (*Brodzinsky, 1990a,b; Reitz and Watson, 1992*). This phenomenon is seen commonly in teenagers who were placed in infancy and whose acting-out behavior arises mainly from what have been called “covert” and “status” losses (*Nickman, 1985*). “Covert loss” refers to prolonged inner reflection about one's personal history of relinquishment and transfer, and of having learned about it long after the event; there is consequent damage to self-esteem and confusion about identity. “Status loss” refers to the experience of being perceived as different from others, or stigmatized, by virtue of some fact about one's birth or status, or some publicly visible anomaly, such as appearing different from one's parents. In addition to having suffered covert and status losses, the older children placed more commonly since the 1970s have undergone substantial *overt* losses (*Nickman, 1985*): neglect, abuse, separation from original caretakers, multiple placements.

The results of these overt, tangible experiences of privation and discontinuity go beyond the usual problems of covert and status losses to include trouble connecting emotionally with adoptive parents and identifying with the adoptive family (*Delaney and Kunstal, 1993; Fishman, 1992*); difficulty in being optimistic about themselves and their lives (*Delaney and Kunstal, 1993*); and impaired concentration because of emotionally and organically rooted problems with attention and learning. An additional factor may be substantial dissimilarity between the child and parents which may lead to a greater alienation from parents than one would expect from an early placement and a relatively atraumatic early history.

In many adoptive families, professionals may observe significant pathology not only in the adolescent but in the family system as well (*Delaney and Kunstal, 1993; Reitz and Watson, 1992*). Clinically, the most relevant issue is not whether the pathology began in the family or was “imported” into it, but that the family as a legally constituted unit needs help to return to a better functioning state.

### **Clinical principles**

When an adoptive family is stressed, professionals can make an invaluable contribution by emphasizing positive aspects, rather than questioning the placement. The complex mutual adjustments that have transpired over the years should be recognized and supported at a time when family members may lose sight of the hopeful aspects of the relationship.

Families with adopted children with special needs may not meet workers’ stereotypes of a typical middle class family. Deeply held religious or ethical convictions may bear on the making of such a commitment. If professionals question these decisions directly or by implication, they may overreach their authority and be perceived as unsympathetic.

Initially, traumatized children may not see parental love as a reward, but rather as coercive and frightening. Many now believe that even disturbed children deserve the chance to profit from family life; innovative management techniques may be required. What may be seen as an under-involved or overly strict management style may in fact be a creative coping strategy, similar to methods of management in well-run group homes or residential treatment centers. Protective service workers assigned to assess adoptive families should be alert to the risk of using a uniform standard of close, warm involvement; this is a Procrustean bed unsuited to many adoptive families.

Therapists need to recognize that many adoptees have sustained psychopathology before entering their present families. Treatment plans should reflect the possibility that adoptive parents may contribute to problems, but also the likelihood that they have developed a degree of expert awareness about their child’s previously acquired difficulties. Those in control of public funds should recognize the ongoing clinical needs of some adoptive families after legalization.

### **Conclusion**

Professionals should be trained in the needs of adoptive families; such training should include instruction about common biases and stigmatizing beliefs. Psychotherapists, social workers, judges, pediatricians, and other experts serving children need to take the adoptive attachment seriously; otherwise they will unwittingly contribute to the dissolution of adoptive families. The anticipated benefits of adoption in general, and special needs adoption in particular, will be lost if these families fail to receive helpful services at times of crisis.

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## **When Your Child Has Significant Mental Health Issues Presented by Lisa Trudeau and Suzanne d'Aversa**

**NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc.  
17th Annual Statewide Adoption Training Conference  
Adoption 2006: There's No Place like Home  
May 12-13, 2006 • Albany New York**

### **Twenty Things That Parents Wish Providers Knew and Would Remember**

#### **Tips from Adoptive Parents Whose Children are Experiencing Emotional illness**

1. We are doing the best we can. This is really hard painful work. It is hard to see our children suffering so, and not able to understand the world like most people do.
2. No parent wants their child to be emotionally ill.
3. We are experts on our children. We know them very well. Listen to us.
4. Don't promise us things you can't provide, or promise us that others will provide them.
5. It is hard to tell our story to the outside world. Be gentle with us.
6. We are grieving for lost hopes, dreams and ideals which haven't or won't be reached.
7. We are tired and sleep deprived. We are exhausted.
8. We are isolated. There aren't many people who understand, and if they do, they are tired too.
9. Don't ask us to tell our story in front of our children.
10. We carry a huge burden as the reporter of what is happening with our child. After all, there is no blood test for mental illness.
11. If you say you will call us, call us back. If we leave a message, call us back.
12. When you have exhausted all your resources, there is still one left. It is US.
13. We will often compromise more than we should.

14. We are competent, and if we become really competent with our child, it is what experience has given us. We still need you just as much. Don't punish us because we have gotten so experienced at caring for our children and think we don't need you just as much.
15. Don't finish our thoughts and sentences. Don't assume you know what we feel. Please take the time to ask us and let us talk.
16. Don't forget that this makes us incredibly sad. We are grieving and some days we feel very raw with emotions.
17. Experiences like raising an emotionally disturbed child means we find out who our real friends and supports are. It means we often have to grieve the loss of someone who we thought was there to support us.
18. Boundaries - we'll keep ours if you keep yours.
19. We do battle to meet the needs of our kids, please don't put us in the position to battle you.
20. You can tell us how hard our job is, but don't tell us to quit. **We are not giving back or giving up on our children.** They have already lost at least one family, their birth family, and we are not going to repeat that experience for them.



The NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children  
501 4<sup>th</sup> Street • Brooklyn, New York 11215  
(607) 272-0034 • [www.nysccc.org](http://www.nysccc.org)

## Resources for Educating Others About The Realities of Adoption and Foster Care

### **A Road Map for Learning, Casey Family Programs:**

A guide for everyone working towards successful educational outcomes for youth in foster care or out-of-home care. This comprehensive guide, published in 2007 by Casey Family Programs, and is available as a 136-page book or as a downloadable PDF file at

<http://www.casey.org/Resources/Publications/RoadMapForLearning.htm>. To request hard copies, send e-mail to [contactus@casey.org](mailto:contactus@casey.org).

### **Endless Dreams DVD, Casey Family Programs:**

A video and curriculum to educate teachers about foster care. The Endless Dreams video showcases the great potential of schools to support and enrich the lives of youth in care. The video features a young woman in care and describes how life in foster care impacts her education. Casey Family Programs offers this 15 minute video upon request at no charge. For a copy of the video, please send e-mail to

[contactus@casey.org](mailto:contactus@casey.org).

### **Adoption 101, North American Council on Adoptable Children:**

This adoption awareness curriculum (approximately (1 1/2 – 2) hrs has been designed to help adoptive parent group leaders and others train child welfare, medical, legal, education, and mental health professionals, and other community members to be more responsive to the needs of adopted children and to work more effectively with their families. <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/Adoption101.pdf>

### **Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children & How Educators Can Help, Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parent Association:**

Developed to provide educators with basic information about adoption-related issues and the effect these issues might have on students, as well as suggestions on how educators can assist and advocate for students who are adopted. Available for download at <http://www.ifapa.org/Brochures/adoption.pdf> . Free print copies that can be requested from the IFAPA office by emailing [cthomason@ifapa.org](mailto:cthomason@ifapa.org) . There may be a charge for out of state residents or bulk orders.

### **Mental Health in Child Welfare, Best Practice Next Practice, Natl. CW Resource Center for Family Centered Practice newsletter, Summer 2003:**

This issue of Best Practice/Next Practice, discusses the complexity of the challenges of mental well-being in child welfare and focuses on issues relating to mental health in child welfare, examining both barriers to and promising practices for accessible, appropriate care for all children in the child welfare system.

Available for download on the NRCFCPPP website at

<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/downloads/newsletter/BPNPSummer03.pdf>

**Adoption and School Resources from Adoptive Family Magazine A collection of page of resources for adoption and school.**

Downloadable handouts and information for your child's teacher, inspiring ideas for adoption presentations and creative approaches to the family tree assignment, advice from experts about development and learning styles, suggested books to read and donate to your child's school, and more. <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/school/index.php>

**Adoption and the Schools: Resources for Parents and Teachers, FAIR - Families Adopting In Response**

Resource manual written to help parents and teachers increase adoption awareness and sensitivity in the school community. Teachers will be able to explore both the impact of adoption on the children they teach and their own influence on the way the adopted child experiences school. Parents will learn more about the impact of adoption on their children's education and how to educate the educators about adoption. Contributors include experienced parents, professionals, and the students themselves. \$25.00 a copy plus \$5.00 handling and shipping from FAIR, PO Box 51436, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Order online at [http://www.fairfamilies.org/book\\_Adoption\\_and\\_Schools.htm](http://www.fairfamilies.org/book_Adoption_and_Schools.htm)

**Children Adrift: Addressing the Educational Needs of New York's Foster Children, NYS Permanent Judicial Commission On Justice for Children:**

Article published in the Albany Law Review providing an overview of NYS Laws and Practices affecting the education of children in foster care. Available as PDF on Justice for children website at <http://www.courts.state.ny.us/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/Children%20%20Adrift.pdf>

**Foster Parents Speak: Crossing Bridges and Fostering Change, NYSCCC and Photosynthesis Productions:**

A 20 minute video / DVD that explores foster parenting today through the experiences and insights of foster families. Foster parents speak candidly about the challenges in developing and nurturing shared parenting relationships with birth families and professionals to benefit the children in their care. They share real life techniques and strategies for improving communication and cooperation to create partnerships that support children in the foster care system. Call 607-272-4242 or visit <http://www.photosynthesisproductions.com/> to order.

**Hunter College Post Graduate Certificate Program in Adoption Therapy:**

Offers advanced education and training for mental health professionals in specialized theories and practices for working with all members of the adoptive triad, including birth mothers and fathers; adoptive mothers and fathers; and the adopted person. Classes will be held once a month, on the first Friday and Saturday of every month beginning in September and continuing through the following June. See <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/adoptiontherapy/> for course overview and registration information.

**Hillside Family of Agencies Learning Institute and Adoption Resource Network Adoption Competency Certificate Program:**

Eight full day session Hillside Family of Agencies Adoption Competency Certificate Program. Eight full day sessions covering the core issues of adoption critical to providing a competent continuum of care for families formed by foster care, kinship, guardianship or adoption. Provides training for: Social workers, mental health professionals, school counselors, and all members of the adoption triad. See <http://www.hillside.com/Services/Adoption/news.htm> for information on course offerings and registration.

## **Cooperative Communication Skills EMERGENCY KIT: A Pocket Guide to Conflict Resolution by Dennis Rivers, M.A.**

*Introduction: "The Cooperative Communication Emergency Kit" evolved at the request of Dr. Paloma Pavel, a Bay Area psychologist who uses The Seven Challenges Workbook as a resource in her team-building work with hospital staffs. She said the Workbook is wonderful but that it is too long. She needed something to give people about conflict resolution and better communication that will fit on a single page, or even better, will fit on a card that folks can carry in their wallets. Then, when conflicts start, the card can remind people of problem-solving behaviors that are hard to remember in the heat of a dispute.*

Many conflicts get worse than they actually need to be because the participants lose control of themselves and retreat into self-reinforcing patterns of attack and counterattack. Here are seven suggestions, drawn from the literature of conflict resolution and psychotherapy, that can help you navigate your way through everyday collisions of needs and come out still liking yourself and able to work with your "partners-in-conflict." When a conflict starts, try these suggestions...

1. Calm yourself down by breathing very slowly and deeply. While breathing, think of a moment of great happiness in your life. Doing this will help you from feeling totally swallowed up by the current situation. It is not all of your life.
2. Think about what you really need. What is best in the long run for your mind, your body, your spirit, your workplace, your family, your community? Don't allow yourself to get distracted from your own goals and needs by what you may see as someone else's misdeeds.
3. Affirm anything that you and your partner-in-conflict might be able to agree on. Vividly imagine your partner-in-conflict as a potential ally. Imagine that you are marooned on a desert island with your partner-in-conflict, and that the long-term survival of both of you depends on the two of you cooperating in some sort of creative way that will meet more of both your needs. Then explore for areas where your interests and needs might overlap with the other person's.
4. Acknowledge and apologize for any mistakes you may have made in the course of the conflict. Others may do the same if you get the ball rolling. Make an accepting space for your partners-in-conflict to start over. Letting go of defending past mistakes can allow participants in a conflict to see their situation from fresh angles.
5. Summarize the other person's needs, feelings and position as fairly as you can, and do this first, before you present your own needs or requests. When people feel heard, they are more likely to listen.
6. Focus on positive goals for the present and the future, no matter what you and/or your partner-in-conflict may have said or done in the past. Punishing or shaming someone for past actions will not put that person in a frame of mind to meet your needs in the present. The present and future are all you can change.
7. Make requests for specific actions that another person could actually do, rather than for overall feelings or attitudes. Explain how the requested actions will help you, so that the other person feels powerful and respected in complying with your request.

*See the Institute for Cooperative Communications website at <http://www.coopcomm.org/index.htm> for free books, essays and exercises to help you, "communicate more creatively, successfully, & compassionately, encourage dialogue/resolve conflicts/prevent violence, & work with family members in building a more cooperative shared life." Reprinted with permission of the author.*

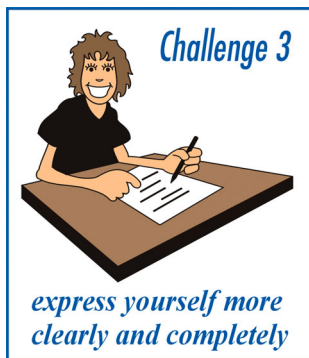


## Challenge Three

### EXPRESSING YOURSELF MORE CLEARLY AND COMPLETELY

**SUMMARY**(repeated from Introduction) Slow down and give your listeners more information about what you are experiencing by using a wide range of “I-statements.” You are likely to get more of your listener’s empathy if you express more of what you are seeing and hearing, feeling, interpreting, wanting, and envisioning. In the pages that follow we will explore each of these aspects of experience and how to express them more clearly.

Anytime one person sincerely listens to another, a very creative process is going on in



which the listener mentally reconstructs the speaker’s experience. The more facets or dimensions of your experience you share with easy-to-grasp “I statements,” the easier it will be for your conversation partner to reconstruct your

experience accurately and understand what you are thinking, feeling and wanting. This is equally worthwhile whether you are trying to solve a problem with someone or trying to express appreciation for them. Expressing yourself this carefully might appear to take longer than your usual quick style of communication. But if you include all the time it takes to unscramble everyday misunderstandings, and to work through the feelings that usually accompany not being understood, expressing yourself more completely can actually take a lot less time.

**Filling in the missing information.** If you observe people in conversation carefully, you

will begin to notice that human communication works by leaving many things unsaid and depending on the listener to fill in the missing-but-implied information. For example, a receptionist may say to a counselor, “**Your two o’clock is here,**” a sentence which, on the face of it, makes no sense at all. She means “**Your client who made an appointment for two o’clock has arrived in the waiting room,**” and the counselor knows that. It’s amazing how much of the time this abbreviating and implying process works just fine. But, in situations of change, ambiguity, conflict, or great emotional need, our “shorthand” way of speaking may not work at all for at least three possible reasons. First, our listeners may fill in a completely different set of details than the one we intended. Second, our listeners may not understand the significance of what we are saying (they get only some of the details, so miss the big picture). And finally, without actually intending to mislead anyone, we may leave out important parts of our experience that we find embarrassing or imagine will evoke a hostile reaction. *The more serious the consequences of misunderstanding would be, the more we need to both understand our own experience better and help our listeners by giving them a more complete picture of our experience in language that does not attack them.*

According to various communication researchers, there are five main dimensions of experience that your conversation partners can use to recreate your experience inside their minds. The more elements you provide, the higher the probability that your listener’s re-creation will match your experience. In this Workbook I will refer to these elements or dimensions of experience as “the five messages.”

**Examples in table format.** The example in the table below outlines a five-part way of saying more of what we are experiencing. The shorthand version of the message below would be something like, “Stop that racing!” Here are the details of the five messages that are left out in the shorthand version: (Please read down the columns)

The Five Messages	express:	Example (in a hospital, nurse to young patient):
<i>seeing, hearing...</i>	1. What are you seeing, hearing or otherwise sensing? (facts only)	<b>“John, when I see you racing your wheelchair down the hall...</b>
<i>and feeling...</i>	2. What emotions are you feeling?	<b>...I feel really upset...</b>
<i>because I...</i>	3. What interpretations, wants, needs, memories or anticipations of yours support those feelings?	<b>...because I imagine that you are going to hurt yourself and someone else, too...</b>
<i>and now I want...</i>	4. What action, information or commitment do you want now?	<b>...so I want you to promise me right now that you will slow down...</b>
<i>so that...</i>	5. What positive results will that action, information or commitment lead to in the future? (no threats)	<b>...so that you can get out of here in one piece and I can stop worrying about a collision.”</b>

Note: My deep appreciation goes to the work of Marshall Rosenberg<sup>13</sup> for helping me to understand Messages 1 through 4, to the work of Sharon and Gordon Bower<sup>14</sup> for helping me understand Message 5, and to the work of John Grinder and Richard Bandler for helping my understand how people “delete” various aspects of their experience from their communication.<sup>15</sup> For interesting variations on the theme of complete messages, see their books noted below.

In the table that starts below and continues on the next page you will find eight examples of statements that would give your listener a full range of information about your experience. Notice how a person’s feelings can change according to the needs and interpretations they bring to a situation. (Please read across the rows)

1. When I saw/heard...	2. I felt...	3. because I... (need, want, interpret, associate, etc.)	4. and now I want (then I wanted)...	5. so that (in order to)...
<b>When I saw the bear in the woods with her three cubs...</b>	<b>...I felt overjoyed!...</b>	<b>...because I needed a picture of bears for my wildlife class...</b>	<b>...and I wanted the bear to stand perfectly still...</b>	<b>so I could focus my camera.</b>
<b>When I saw the bear in the woods with her three cubs...</b>	<b>...I felt terrified!...</b>	<b>...because I remembered that bears with cubs are very aggressive...</b>	<b>...and I wanted to get out of there fast...</b>	<b>so that the bear would not pick up my scent.</b>

<sup>13</sup> Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*. Del Mar, CA: PuddleDancer Press. 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Anthony Bower and Gordon H. Bower, *Asserting Yourself: A Practical Guide for Positive Change*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1976.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *The Structure of Magic, Vol 1*. Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books. 1975.

**MORE EXAMPLES OF THE FIVE MESSAGES IN ACTION:**

<i>1. When I saw/heard...</i>	<i>2. I felt...</i>	<i>3. because I...(need, want, interpret, associate, etc.)</i>	<i>4. and now I want (then I wanted)...</i>	<i>5. so that (in order to)...</i>
<b>When I saw the dishes in the sink...</b>	<b>...I felt happy...</b>	<b>...because I guessed that you had come back from your trip to Mexico...</b>	<b>...and I want you to tell me all about the Aztec ruins you saw...</b>	<b>...so that I can live up some scenes in the short story I'm writing.</b>
<b>When I saw the dishes in the sink...</b>	<b>...I felt irritated...</b>	<b>...because I want to start cooking dinner right away...</b>	<b>...and I want to ask you to help me do the dishes right now...</b>	<b>...so that dinner will be ready by the time our guests arrive.</b>
<b>When I saw the flying saucer on your roof...</b>	<b>... felt more excited than I have ever been in my life...</b>	<b>...because I imagined the saucer people would give you the anti-gravity formula...</b>	<b>...and I wanted you to promise that you would share it with me...</b>	<b>...so that we would both get rich and famous.</b>
<b>When I saw the flying saucer on your roof...</b>	<b>...I felt more afraid than I have ever been in my life...</b>	<b>...because I imagined the saucer people were going to kidnap you...</b>	<b>...and I wanted you to run for your life...</b>	<b>...so that you would not get abducted and maybe turned into a zombie.</b>
<b>When I saw the grant application in the office mail...</b>	<b>...I felt delighted...</b>	<b>...because I think our program is good enough to win a large grant...</b>	<b>...and I want to ask you to help me with the budget pages...</b>	<b>...so that we can get the application in before the deadline.</b>
<b>When I saw the grant application in the office mail...</b>	<b>...I felt depressed...</b>	<b>...because I can't see clients when I'm filling out forms...</b>	<b>...and I want you to help me with the budget pages...</b>	<b>...so that I can keep up my case work over the next three weeks.</b>

## The Great Back-to-School Kit

17 simple and effective ways to bring adoption into the classroom.

**1 Write a letter to your child’s teacher.** By briefly explaining your family’s background and providing her with language to use when talking about adoption in the classroom, you make it clear that you:

- believe that families are created through love, not genetics;
- believe that adoption is something to be celebrated, not hidden;
- are available as a resource in the classroom.

Find several sample letters to use when composing your own at [adoptivefamilies.com/school](http://adoptivefamilies.com/school).

**2 Read an adoption storybook to the class during story time.** An engaging tale is a great way to introduce a new topic to younger kids. Use a book to begin an adoption presentation, or simply offer to read to the class during regular story hour. *AF* readers’ favorites include:

- *All About Adoption*, by Marc Nemiroff (Magination Press; ages 4-8). This introductory book explains adoption and explores different feelings children may experience as they grow.
- *How I Was Adopted*, by Joanna Cole (Harper Trophy; ages 4-8). This well-known children’s book is notable within adoption literature for beginning with and explaining birth.
- *A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza (Putnam Juvenile; ages 3-6). A little bird searches for a mother and is welcomed into Mrs. Bear’s home. This sweet story is very reassuring for young kids.
- *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperTrophy; ages 4-10). This now-classic tale is less didactic than most adoption books. The storyline is sure to capture all kids’ interest.

To keep adoption stories on the radar year-round, donate a set of books to your child’s classroom.

**3 Give an adoption presentation in first or second grade.** This is a wonderful way to educate your child’s peers, and teachers are usually enthusiastic. Explain adoption in a general way, rather than tell your child’s particular story. Using dolls or other props will help non-adopted kids relate. Here’s a simple, parent-tested presentation to use as a model:

- Bring in one of your child’s dolls or stuffed animals. Tell everyone her name—Sandy, for example—and let each student hold her.
- Ask the kids to help complete two lists on the blackboard: “What babies need” (bottles, food, clothes,

hugs, and so on) and “What parents do” (feed, clothe, change, hug and kiss, and so on). If the kids don’t say “bring babies into the world,” add it to the parents’ list.

- Tell them that Sandy’s birthparents brought her into the world, but that they realized they could not do all the other things parents do. Tell them that Sandy’s forever parents wanted to do all those things for her, even though they didn’t bring her into this world.
- Finish by explaining that Sandy has two sets of real parents—her real birthparents and her real forever family—and that she needs both to be who she is.
- Don’t forget food! End your classroom presentation with a snack.

To read more articles describing adoption presentations for students of all ages, visit [adoptivefamilies.com/school](http://adoptivefamilies.com/school).

**4 Educate other parents.** The parents of your child’s classmates may wonder how to talk to their children about adoption. Give them a hand by sending [“Helping Classmates Understand Adoption”](#) home with the students in your child’s class. *AF*’s handout provides conversation guidelines and sample Q & As—and sends the message that adoption is a wonderful and normal way to build a family.

**5 Suggest a community service project around National Adoption Day**, which falls on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. This day celebrates the adoptions of children in foster care around the U.S. Your child’s class might accept donations of food and clothing for foster families, make cards thanking foster parents for the important work they do, or donate and wrap holiday gifts for local foster kids. Visit [nationaladoptionday.org](http://nationaladoptionday.org) for more ideas.

**6 Parental involvement is often the key to a successful school year.** Let the teacher know that you’re an ally. Schedule a one-on-one meeting early in the school year to introduce yourself and your family. This will give you a chance to:



- let her know how to handle adoption-related topics that may come up in the classroom. For example, if you are in an open adoption, let her know that your child may mention her birth family. If you are a single parent, give examples of how you’d like her to handle the “missing daddy” question, (e.g. “Tommy’s family doesn’t have a daddy. His family has a mommy, a brother, and a sister”).
- ask if she’s planning assignments that require baby photos or information (the family tree, an autobiographical timeline, “star of the week”) and present alternatives (see #8).
- offer to give a classroom presentation, talk to other teachers, or simply be on call for questions that arise. If a teacher hasn’t had much experience with the topic before, such an offer will be reassuring—and will help her understand that adoption is not unmentionable.

**7 Introduce the topic of racial differences in people around the world.** Many children, especially those who live in relatively homogenous parts of the country, benefit from learning how children around the world look, what they wear, and how they live. These books are good places to start:

- *We’re Different, We’re the Same*, by Bobbi Kates (Random House; ages 3-8). Familiar Sesame Street characters introduce young readers to people of different ethnicities.
- *Children Just Like Me*, by Anabel Kindersley (Dorling Kindersley; ages 8-12). This photo-filled book is an engaging look at children around the world.
- *If the World Were a Village*, by David Smith (Kids Can Press; ages 8-12). This beautifully illustrated book reduces the world’s population of 6.2 billion people to 100, making it easier for kids to grasp the

prevalence of different ethnicities, religions, languages, and so on.

**8 Help teachers rethink sticky assignments.** Projects designed to explore a child's past can be difficult for our kids. Encourage your child's teacher to present several options to the entire class, not just to your child. Here are ideas for more inclusive projects:

- **Family Tree:** Students can draw themselves on the trunk of a tree and someone whom they love on each branch, regardless of biological or adoptive relationships. Or they can place names of adoptive family members in the branches of a tree and birth family members in its roots. Using a house metaphor in lieu of a tree allows flexibility to incorporate all members of a child's family.
- **Timeline:** Instead of starting with their birthdates, children can cite memorable events from each calendar year they've been alive; older students can create a timeline that includes a national or world event from each year they have been alive.
- **Star of the Week:** Request that students bring in photographs of themselves from a year or two ago, rather than baby photos.

**9 Arm your child with answers to questions she may be asked in class or on the playground.** Your child may want to give different answers, depending on her mood. Here are a few options you can propose:

**Q: "Where do you come from?"**

A: "What do you mean? Are you asking where I was born or where I live?" or "New York."

**Q: "Is that your real mother?"**

A: "Yes. She dropped me off at school today," or "Do you mean my birthmother? I don't live with my birthmother."

**Q: "Why didn't your real mother want you?"**

A: "Are you asking why I was placed for adoption?" or "My birthmother couldn't take care of me, but she made sure I was adopted by my parents," or "That's private."

**Q: "Why don't you speak Chinese?"**

A: "I am American like you, so I speak English."

**10 Celebrate your child's adoption day at school.** Just as children often celebrate birthdays at school, adoptive families may plan classroom festivities to honor their children's adoption days. We can visit our child's classroom to read a book—like *We Adopted You, Benjamin Koo*, by Linda Walvoord Girard (Albert Whitman & Co.; ages 4-8), or *Happy Adoption Day*, by John McCutcheon (Little, Brown; ages 2-6)—and cap off the occasion with treats.



If you adopted an older child, ask him if he'd like to celebrate his finalization or naturalization with his classmates.

**11 Place adoption in the broader context of nontraditional families.** Ask the teacher or curriculum director to plan a unit on nontraditional families, including single-parent, step-, gay/lesbian, grandparent-headed, and adoptive. Here are some books and videos that send an inclusive message:

- *Families Are Different*, by Nina Pellegrini (Scholastic; ages 4-8). When an adoptee worries that she

doesn't look like her family, her mom helps her understand that all families are different.

- *The Family Book*, by Todd Parr (Little, Brown; ages 3-6). This cheery, colorful book sends the message that diversity is a natural part of life. The book is perfect for preschoolers.
- *All Families Are Different*, by Sol Gordon (Prometheus Books; ages 4-8). Written from a child's point of view, this book suggests sample responses kids can use. For example, "If other kids tease you because your family is 'different,' just say, 'Yeah, they are! All families are different.'"
- *That's a Family*, by Women's Educational Media (womedia.org; ages 8-12). This 30-minute documentary film introduces viewers to real families in all different shapes and sizes. Teachers can use the Discussion and Teaching Guide to plan related lessons.

**12 Teach the teachers.** Write to the school principal or Parent-Teacher Association to suggest a professional training session about adoption and alternative families for the school's faculty. Look for a nearby organization that offers programs like the ones run by The Center for Adoption Support and Education, in Silver Spring, Maryland, that can address children's understanding of adoption at different ages, adjusting assignments for family diversity, and talking about differences.

Here are five vital points for education professionals to understand:

1. Adoption is an open and natural topic in your family. Teachers should not be afraid to discuss it or to answer students' questions.
2. Children born in a different country are not experts on the language or culture of that country.
3. There are neither real families nor fake families. Adoptive parents are parents like any others.
4. Genetics and immigration can be taught without requiring students to trace their nuclear family's roots [see #15].
5. Parents of all types will appreciate more inclusive versions of "star of the week," as well as autobiographical timeline and family tree projects.

**13 When presenting adoption to 10-year-olds,** the teacher's cooperation and your child's involvement are key. Read an account of one parent's adoption presentation: [Adoption 101 in Room 26](#).

**14 Help the teacher blend adoption into the curriculum.** Mentioning adoption from time to time in a matter-of-fact way helps kids see that adoption is a normal life experience for many families.

For example, when studying biology and genetics in science class, adoption can be discussed in the context of nature vs. nurture. In a unit on immigration, the teacher can tell students that more than 20,000 young children become U.S. citizens each year via international adoption.

**15 Give the teacher ready-made answers for common classroom adoption questions:**

**Q: "Where are Ben's real parents?"**

A: "Ben's real parents are the parents who are raising him, John and Kathy, who pick him up from school each day. He also has birthparents who gave birth to him."

**Q: "Why didn't Ben's first family want him?"**

A: "They probably wanted him very much but couldn't take care of any baby at that time. They wanted him to have a family to love him and take care of him forever."

**Q: "Where is Ben from?"**

A: "He's from Ohio. He was born in Russia, but now he's a U.S. citizen, like you."

**Q: “Does he speak Russian?”**

**A:** “No. Ben came to the U.S. when he was a baby. He was not speaking any language at the time! Children speak the language of the country they are raised in, just as you speak English and not the language your grandparents spoke before they immigrated to the U.S.”

**16 Donate a packet of educator materials to the school.** For even more talking guidelines, alternatives to sticky assignments, and strategies for generally making the classroom a supportive, welcoming environment for all children, provide your child’s teacher or school with copies of:

- *Adoption and the Schools* ([fairfamilies.org](http://fairfamilies.org)). Adoption organization Families Adopting in Response put together this 250-page resource for parents and teachers.
- *An Educator’s Guide to Adoption* ([adoptioninformationinstitute.org](http://adoptioninformationinstitute.org)). A reference booklet about creating a parent-teacher partnership, published by the Institute for Adoption Information.
- *S.A.F.E. at School* ([adoptionsupport.org](http://adoptionsupport.org)). Strategies from the Center for Adoption Support and Education for ensuring an adoption-friendly school environment.

**17 Celebrate the many cultures of the world.** Many school curricula include international culture fairs or country reports. Volunteer to make dishes from all cultures of origin in your family, or to read a traditional folktale, play music, or bring in clothing or artifacts.



Encourage the school to observe diverse holidays, such as Cinco de Mayo, Kwanzaa, Chinese New Year, and Diwali. Holiday activities are naturally engaging ways to introduce kids to other cultures. In December, kids will get a kick out of seeing how people around the world celebrate Christmas. Visit [adoptivefamilies.com/holidays](http://adoptivefamilies.com/holidays) for details on Russian Christmas, La Navidad, and more.

*Children Just Like Me: Celebrations*, by Anabel Kindersley (Dorling Kindersley) is a fascinating look at holidays around the globe. Or, your child’s classmates will enjoy hearing the Cinderella tale as it’s told in his birth culture. From *Baba Yaga & Vasilissa* (Russian) to *Cendrillon* (French Creole), find storybook retellings from around the world at [cultureforkids.com](http://cultureforkids.com).

<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=1455>

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## **Tips on Soliciting Donations From Local Community Organizations And Businesses**

If you are a not-for-profit community based organization/group that provides support services to foster/adoptive families you may be overlooking one of the simplest ways to raise money for activities and projects – just asking people to help. A good deal of the groundwork has already been done for you. Most people in most communities already have an awareness of child abuse and neglect issues and have a concern for children in foster care. All you need do is provide them with a opportunity to feel they are making a difference in abused and neglected children's' lives and a mechanism for receiving well deserved community recognition of their concern and contribution.

**Solicit donations for specific projects/expenses** - Contributors like to fund things or events instead of organizations, the more tangible the better. Think about events your organization holds on a regular basis (social events / training seminars) or expenses such as newsletter/brochure printing that can offer sponsors a promotional opportunity. Local firms like to see their names/logos on things, such as flyers advertising an event, websites, or durable goods such as T-shirts, books, pencils etc. Be creative - before deciding to spend money on something such as renting a tent or buying food for a foster family picnic, think about organizations that would appreciate having their name associated with the event. Consider everything you do/produce as an opportunity for local organizations to gain recognition for their contribution towards helping kids.

**Set your sponsorship targets** – Aim high, what may seem like a lot of money to you (i.e. \$500) may be only a small portion of a successful local firm's advertising/promotion budget. Provide potential contributors with several funding options/levels and be prepared to explain the promotional benefits sponsors will receive from their contribution. Let sponsors pick the amount and the attendant publicity that accompanies their donation.

**Develop a list of potential donors/sponsors** - Target local firms and organizations first. National chain outlets (i.e. Wal-Mart or Target) usually have corporate giving protocols that local store managers must adhere to. Locally owned/managed businesses, (who depend on community goodwill to stay in business) have more flexibility to decide causes and organizations they want to be associated with, and the motivation to fund local grass roots initiatives. You will probably be more successful in receiving a \$100 cash donation from a locally owned business supply firm than your local Staples outlet. But don't ignore the big guys, they can provide you with great discounts on purchases and promotional opportunities - just don't depend on them for cash.

Obtain lists of local businesses and contacts from your local Chamber of Commerce and/or Merchant Association. Research local firm giving via your local United Way and Community Foundation (at a minimum get a copy of their annual reports and visit their websites.) Read your local newspaper daily and pay attention to articles about community projects/initiatives funded by local firms/individuals. Think about how your project would fit in with their other community support initiatives. Go through old donor lists or volunteer lists and see if any are still prominent in your community. The reason they may have not given recently may be as simple as they haven't been asked.

**Don't limit your fundraising efforts to businesses** – Unions, service clubs (Rotary, Kiwanis) and social clubs (i.e. Eagles, Elks, etc.) and churches are all good sources of donations and they don't ask for anything in return other than a thank you and recognition. Social clubs such as the Eagles or American Legions generally conduct some type of ongoing gambling/lottery games on their premises and are required by law to contribute a portion

to charity. Many of these groups are actively seeking community service projects to become affiliated with and will appreciate the opportunity to be associated with a project they don't have to plan or manage.

When thinking about unions don't forget law enforcement organizations such as the PBA and correctional officers who generally already have concerns for prevention of child abuse and neglect and child welfare issues in their community. Other types of groups to consider are health care providers (especially pediatricians) and the legal community (especially family law firms).

**Identify/create personal relationships with target funders** - Consider everyone working for, volunteering for, or receiving services from your organization as a potential fundraiser. Members of your board have a particularly important role in fundraising. Identify people affiliated with your organization who do business with, or are members of, potential sponsor firms and organizations to approach them on your behalf. This is particularly effective when soliciting donations from local service/ social clubs and churches. Existing donors who have made a commitment to your mission can also be effective ambassadors within their own communication and business networks, i.e. lawyers can challenge other lawyers to match their donation.

Offer to speak at civic meetings area churches or worship centers and offer a trifold information brochure about your nonprofit group complete with a "tear off" donation pledge card or newsletter sign up form on the final third portion. Groups like Kiwanis or Rotary clubs are always looking for speakers to present brief "programs" for their weekly meetings. You'll be doing them a favor and most will reward you with at least a token cash donation. If you can, bring along a slide show or video with pictures of kids/families who benefit from your services. Identify someone who belongs to, or join, your local Chamber of Commerce to spread the word. Most Chambers hold frequent social and networking events that will provide you with opportunities to develop personal relationships with member organizations.

**Solicit donations early in the calendar year** – Many firms/organizations plan their community donation budget as part of their annual budget process. Send out fundraising letters or requests during December or January at the latest. Start fundraising for an event or project as soon as you set the date.

**Develop a means to provide sponsors with recognition for their donation** – Think beyond thank you letters, what kind of tangible recognition can you offer potential sponsors? Include sponsor names/logos on brochures, event flyers, your website, newsletters; or items you provide to assist families or kids such as backpacks, school supplies, advocacy guides or service directories. Provide firms with tangible items such as framed certificates, plastic tent cards, or stickers identifying their sponsorship to display in their place of business. Send out press releases and/or write letters to the editor to your local newspaper thanking sponsors and, if possible, include pictures of representatives presenting you with their donation.

**Maintain records of sponsor donations and ensure that your list reflects those who have paid and those who have still to give you their contribution** – A pledge is only a pledge, sometimes people genuinely forget what they have promised. Place a friendly phone call or send a reminder thanking them again for their pledge and providing an update on plans for the event/project they pledged to support.

**Don't overlook in-kind contributions or donations of volunteer time** – Lots of firms find it more cost effective to donate product rather than cash; for instance printing services, paper products, food, free advertising space, or discounts on purchases. Buy one, get one free deals can save you significant funds and still provide sponsors with a small or break-even profit margin. Big Box firms (i.e. Target), local colleges, and youth organizations are a good source of volunteers. Don't forget to solicit volunteer consultant services such as accounting, legal, technology, advertising, or graphic design services.