

## Education and Adoption: Issues to Keep in Mind When Working with Students and Families



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

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

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

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

Other factors that will affect children's experiences are their age and previous life experiences. If they were adopted internationally, they may not know anything about their bio family; if they were adopted from the foster care system, they may have lingering issues of abuse and neglect.

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

Be aware of social stigmas and stereotypes (such as using words like “biological parent” instead of “real parent”) so you can be sensitive to classroom needs—especially when assigning home work, handling behavioral issues, and scheduling Individualized Education Plans. Adoption is not a “one-size fits all.” Each child will grieve in his or her own way.

### So how can you get involved?

- **Be sensitive to each child** in the classroom. Depending on your relationship with the child's parents you may want to find out if a child knows he/she is adopted. For adoption-related materials, visit our library at: [www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/advancedsearch.asp](http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/advancedsearch.asp)
- **Become informed.** Learn as much about the children in your classroom as possible. This is especially important for children who are showing signs of behavioral issues, which obviously happens with biological children, as well. Trying to find out the trigger of a behavior is key

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in helping each child cope or overcome each situation.

- **Continue to be flexible with your curriculum.** Sometimes projects such as family trees or gene-o-grams may confuse, frustrate, or stir up mixed feelings among children, especially teens.
- **Find creative ways to accommodate all types of families.** For example, instead of having children create a family tree, have them talk about what family means to them, or allow them to create a tree of all family members including biological family members as the roots, foster families as the trunk and adoptive family members as the branches. If there is ever a question about the appropriateness of an assignment, discuss it with the parents first.
  - Other assignments that may be difficult for adoptive children include: bringing in baby pictures, discussing the child's past, heritage, and genetics assignments. For more information, please view the Adoptive Families website, *Tackling Tricky Assignments* at: <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/Assignments.pdf>.
- **Continue to reinforce that every family is unique.** For ideas on classroom activities view <http://www.emkpress.com/school.html> or PDF/Scan in the HO#7 from the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program.
- **Use positive adoption language**, such as “my child” instead of “my own child” or

“created an adoption plan” instead of “given up for adoption.” For further examples go to: <http://adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/PositiveLanguage.pdf>

- **Advocate and support parents.** Continue taking extra time to meet with parents regarding their child(ren). When meeting with parents, focus on discussing each child's strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. Keeping parents informed on their child's behavior and educational standing will help them to assist their child with possible educational needs, and allow parents to be more prepared if the child is in need of an IEP.
- If the child is in need of an IEP, continue to support the parents during meetings by allowing them a chance to speak and be heard. You may want to find out what tactics work for each parent and ask for their input on behavioral challenges.

To help parents learn more about advocacy visit <http://nacac.org/training/training.html>. Adoption Resources of Wisconsin also hosts trainings. For more information on these, please call us at 800.762.8063.

### The Effects of Trauma

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

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, “A traumatic event can

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seriously interrupt the school routine and the processes of teaching and learning. They may have increased difficulties concentrating and learning at school and may engage in unusually reckless behavior.”

Conversely, they may also shut down completely and their silence belies the turmoil that’s happening within.

For an example on the way a single event affected three students differently, go to: [http://www.ncsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=glo\\_popup&id=threestudents](http://www.ncsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=glo_popup&id=threestudents)

Another example of how educators can inadvertently impact a child’s perception is the following:

A fourth grade girl who was born in Guatemala was adopted at nine months by a Wisconsin family. When her class was learning about immigration, the teacher referred to this girl as an immigrant. This upset her and changed her views about her heritage and adoption story.

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

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



## ARW Resources

The following books are available from our library at:

<https://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/plugins/library/advancedsearch.asp> or call us at: 800.762.8063.

- “Adoption and the Schools,” By Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng
- “What Family Tree? School Issues and the Adopted Child,” Curriculum Developed by Wood and Norris.

## Online Resources

Adoptive Families  
[www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)

Adoption Online: School Issues  
<http://www.adoptiononline.com/aecschoolliss.html>

Services for School Aged Children:  
<http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pdf/schoolageparents.pdf>

Law/Statutes  
<http://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/sspwstats.html>

Special Education Handbook:  
<http://www.specialed.us/pl-07/pl07-index.html>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
[http://www.ncsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr\\_aud\\_schl](http://www.ncsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_aud_schl)