

**ADOPTION IN THE SCHOOLS: A LOT TO LEARN**  
**Promoting Equality and Fairness for all Children and Their Families**

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Policy Perspective

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*“I know that all families are good – my teacher taught me that.”*

As adoption becomes increasingly normalized in the United States, more and more adoptive families are confronting a range of challenges when their children attend school. Interactions with administrators, teachers, peers and other parents can become complex and impact the adoptee negatively on many levels. The issues involved range from the language used by both the children and adults; when and what to tell school personnel about the children and their pasts; and, as the children grow older, how to deal with questions related to ethnicity, birthparents, nationality, genealogical background, and traditional lesson plans such as drawing “family trees.”

Teachers have a major influence on children’s understanding of the world around them – and of themselves. That is a major reason why the routine professional training of educators in recent years has come to include issues relating to race and ethnicity, disability, gender, blended families, and a range of other subjects aimed at understanding diversity and promoting fair and equal treatment for all the children they teach. The intent of the preparation about these subjects is not just to increase the teachers’ sensitivity, but also to equip them with knowledge – knowledge that will shape their own behavior and attitudes, as well as the behavior and attitudes of their students.

What goes on at school has pivotal importance for children for a variety of reasons. School takes up a huge portion of their lives, and their experiences there help to shape their self-images, their peer relationships, and others’ views of their competence. It is also where they learn many of their values, accumulate most of their knowledge, and develop the skills to equip them to succeed as adults.

This policy brief – jointly researched and written by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and the Center for Adoption Support and Education – outlines the reasons educators need to learn more about adoption issues (including aspects of foster care), explains the negative consequences of a lack of knowledge, and proposes steps that teachers, schools, curriculum developers and institutions of higher education can take to change the status quo and, as a result, make vital progress toward placing all children and families on a level playing field in the classroom and beyond.

**Background and reasons for educating educators**

Learning is the “work” of childhood. For very young children, learning comes primarily through play and, as they enter school, classroom learning takes up the better part of their days. It is the primary arena in which children’s performance is judged in relation to peers, and they experience pressure to perform.



Likewise, there is pressure on parents to facilitate children's adjustment at school. When children have difficulty fitting in at school or measuring up to expectations, many areas are affected. Even when children perform well, their school experiences play a major role in shaping key aspects of adjustment, including:

- The children's self concept,
- Their peer group experience,
- Their ability to have educational needs met in order to learn successfully, and
- The parent-child relationship, including parents' views of their children, the stress they experience in parenting, and their feelings of competence as parents.

In addition to these general influences experienced by all children, adopted children's interactions at school – with both teachers and their classmates – provide important messages regarding adoption that help to shape their identity as adopted persons.

While this paper focuses primarily on adoption, the same (or sometimes comparable) issues apply to children in foster care who are not living with their birthparents. Most adopted and foster children confront situations at school that highlight their perceived "different" status from classmates who are being raised by their biological parents. For example, consider the following statements from children:

*"...I hate it when we talk about traits we have inherited from our parents—teachers never do anything when kids start figuring out that I am Exhibit A in a family that doesn't all have the same DNA."*

*"There's one kid who bugs me all the time about being adopted."*

*"I want my teacher to help me when I get asked so many questions."*

*"If my teacher never talks about adoption, I think she doesn't like it."*

Teachers need to be prepared with both sensitivity and knowledge about adoption in order to assist all children and their families in successfully dealing with issues on an ongoing basis. These questions and challenges may arise in class discussions, during interactions among students, and in completing assignments. Their explicit and implicit messages about adoption and/or foster care, or their lack thereof, have an impact on adopted and foster children – and help to shape other children's attitudes and beliefs.

Educators clearly want to do well for all the children whose lives they shape – it is the principal reason they choose teaching as their professional careers. But they receive no systematic training in two important aspects of many students' lives: adoption and foster care. As a result, they may inadvertently use language, teach lesson plans, and/or display attitudes that can hurt children's feelings, perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes, and transmit the message that some families (i.e. those formed through biology) are more normal and acceptable than others.

## **Recommendations**

The best way to provide all children with the education and support they deserve is to make systemic changes that will have broad, permanent effects. Research and experience indicate these changes would benefit adopted and foster children:

- Education about adoption and foster care should be included in courses (such as on diversity) that are required for students in teacher education programs – as well as in professional development trainings for current teachers, psychologists, guidance counselors, social workers and other relevant school personnel.
- Studies should be conducted focusing on the outcomes of adoption-related educational programs for teachers (as well as other relevant school personnel), and the findings should be utilized to improve trainings, lesson plans, etc.

- Trainings should be developed for adoptive and foster parents on ways to advocate for their children in the schools; expert educational advocates should also be available to parents – as should access to support networks and resources such as occupational therapists, psychologists and other local, out-of-school professionals knowledgeable about adoption issues.
- Child welfare and educational organizations should collaborate to remove systemic barriers that impede the education of foster children, for example, to create policies that promote educational continuity for foster children so they do not have to change schools in the middle of a school year.

Educating educators about the realities of adoption and adoptive families is important as a diversity issue, because children should not be less understood or more stigmatized simply because of the type of family they happen to be in. It is a fairness issue, because adopted and foster children are sometimes derided in ways we would never accept if the taunting or stereotyping referred to other aspects of their being – such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion or disability. And it is an inclusion issue, because the knowledge gained in learning about adoptive and foster families also applies to families headed by single parents, divorced parents, step parents, gay or lesbian parents, parents of different races or ethnicities, and on and on. In other words, doing the right thing for one group of children means doing the right thing for a majority of children.

### **Issues influencing school adjustment among adopted and foster children**

According to the U.S. Census (2006), 1 in 25 households with children has at least one adopted child. In addition, there are over 515,000 children living in child welfare placements, primarily foster homes. These children come from diverse situations and have different needs, but research and experience tell us that nearly all at times feel different from other children they know.

There is a significant body of research that reports higher rates of adjustment difficulties among adopted children; although there are some methodological problems with many of the studies, and a few show no differences. Adoption professionals and adoptive parents are concerned that reports of a higher level of issues among adopted children results in a perception that adoption itself is a problem – or that adoptees necessarily have problems. It is important to recognize that the vast majority of adopted children are flourishing in all areas of their lives, with some studies indicating that they perform better than their non-adopted peers in some areas. Overall, the highest risks are found among children who spend more than six months in institutional care and those who have undergone serious neglect and abuse; so the challenges they face are typically rooted in their previous life experiences, rather than being linked to the fact that they were adopted or to adoption per se.

In the U.S. today, the largest group of children being adopted each year comes from the foster care system; the latest available statistics put the number at 52,000 in FY2004 (AFCARS, 2006). More than 20,000 additional children are adopted from other countries annually; the latest count – about 23,000 – comes from U.S. visas issued for children born in other countries and adopted into American families (U.S. Department of State, 2006). The number of domestic infant adoptions is not officially tallied anywhere, but is estimated at around 13,000 to 14,000 a year<sup>1</sup> (Hamilton, Ventura, Martin & Sutton, 2004). While there are similarities in the issues children confront in school adjustment regardless of how they came to adoption, there also are significant differences in their past histories and needs. Therefore, each group will be discussed here separately.

**Domestic Infant Adoptions:** For children adopted in infancy, differences with their peers do not seem to be manifested until they are school age, and there is evidence that these differences subside in young adulthood (Brodzinsky, Radice, Huffman & Merkle, 1987; Feigelman, 1997). Many authors have theorized that some adopted children's emotional struggles with identity can contribute to behavioral problems during middle childhood and adolescence. Children placed as infants generally feel positively about their adoption experience until they are around 7 or 8 years old. It is around this age, when they are

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<sup>1</sup> This figure is based on the current number of births to unmarried women and the most recently known rate of relinquishment among never-married women.

moving developmentally from concrete to abstract thinking, that they begin to comprehend the implications of adoption: The woman who gave birth to me for some reason could not take care of me, and so I was placed with new parents. They become more aware of the loss of their birth families, may cope with feelings of rejection related to being relinquished, and may even feel negatively about the difference between their families and those formed biologically. During middle childhood and adolescence, they typically integrate "being adopted" into their sense of identity.

Most of the earliest studies of a higher rate of developmental issues among adopted children were conducted on clinical populations and reported that adopted children were two to five times more likely to require psychological treatment than their non-adopted counterparts. A review of 15 such studies is summarized by McRoy, Grotevant and Zurcher (1988). Many researchers have raised concerns about basing such conclusions primarily on examinations of clinical populations, and one study documented that adoptive parents seek help for their children more readily than do other parents (Warren, 1992), thereby skewing the results.

A series of studies by Brodzinsky and his colleagues were among the first large-scale examinations on non-clinical populations of children adopted in infancy, using comparison groups of non-adopted children. They documented higher risk among adopted children; that is, parents rated their adopted children, ages 6 to 12, as lower in school achievement and as demonstrating more hyperactive, aggressive and delinquent behaviors than their non-adopted peers. Teacher ratings also evidenced more school-related problems among adopted children. Overall, Brodzinsky and his associates reported that 36 percent of adoptees exceeded the normal range in one or more behavioral areas, as compared to 14 percent of non-adopted children (Brodzinsky et al., 1987; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff & Singer, 1984).

Adopted children also are significantly more likely to be receiving special education services (Brodzinsky & Steiger, 1991; Howard, Smith & Ryan, 2004). In the latter study, 9 percent of children living in their biological families were receiving special education services for learning difficulties, as compared with 24 percent of domestic infant adoptees, 32 percent of international adoptees, and 40 percent of child welfare adoptees. Despite having more learning difficulties, however, domestic infant and internationally adopted children had a lower frequency of repeating a grade than did children from biological families. Despite the increased incidence of psychological issues, the vast majority of children adopted as infants have been found to be well within the normal range of adjustment.

**International Adoptions:** Studies looking at outcomes among internationally adopted children vary considerably in their findings, depending on a child's age at adoption, length of time in an institution, and the extent of deprivation experienced. Some children placed internationally are not cared for in institutions, and these children show fewer problems at entry into their adoptive families (Groza & Ryan, 2002; Miller, Chan, Comfort & Tirella, 2005). Furthermore, it seems that outcomes differ according to the conditions of the orphanages and the countries from which they came. Some studies of children adopted internationally at very young ages and of girls adopted from China reported these adoptees compared favorably to their non-adopted peers several years later (Tan & Yang, 2005; Tan & Marfo, 2006).

Research on children adopted from Eastern European countries, especially Romania and Russia, finds the highest rates of problems. Studies on the outcomes of these adoptions report a range of health problems, growth delays, sensory integration difficulties, speech delays, developmental delays in cognitive, motor and social skills, and behavior and emotional problems among a sizable proportion of children (Johnson, 2000; Groza & Ileana, 1996; Groza, Ryan & Cash, 2003; Rutter & O'Connor, 2004).

According to Dr. Dana Johnson (2000), Director of the International Adoption Clinic at the University of Minnesota Children's Hospital, the largest adoption-related medical program in the world, and a senior fellow of the Adoption Institute, 36 percent of the Romanian post-institutionalized children in his research scored in the clinical range on the Child Behavior Checklist three years after arrival. Other research indicates that the proportion of children with cognitive impairments (below 80 IQ) increased with length of institutionalization: 2 percent in those with less than 6 months in an orphanage; 12 percent in those with 6-24 months duration; and 33 percent in those with 24-42 months. Assessment of disturbed attachment patterns varied similarly, from 8.9 percent to 33.3 percent, depending on the length of institutionalization.

There was substantial variation in outcomes even for children institutionalized for more than two years, with no clear indication of why some are more resilient than others (Rutter & O'Connor, 2004).

An online survey, conducted by the Eastern European Adoption Coalition of its members, highlights the level of school issues for these children. Parents reporting on 293 school-age adopted children (65 percent adopted from Russia) said that many of these children had special educational needs – 58 percent with developmental delays, 49 percent with emotional disorders, and 48 percent with neurological impairments. Forty percent received special educational services, and additional children needed special tutoring (McCarthy, 2005).

When studies examine children adopted internationally from many different countries, including Asian and South American, they do not show as high a rate of problems as the studies described above. The study cited earlier, comparing different types of adopted and birth children, found that those adopted internationally from many different countries were 2.4 times more likely than birth children to score at a very high level of behavior problems, and 21 percent took medications for behavior or emotional problems (Howard et. al, 2004). However, only 3 percent had repeated a grade in school, which was lower than any other group examined.

Many children adopted internationally also face challenges surrounding the fact that they are of a different race/ethnicity than their parents. Transracial adoption creates an extra layer of complexities, which often is accentuated when the child enters school. A recent Dutch study of children adopted internationally at only a few months of age found a link between emotional struggles with being “different” and a higher rate of behavior problems; i.e., the adoptees who expressed “the wish not to be or to look different” had more behavior problems (Juffer, 2006).

**Child Welfare Adoptions:** Children adopted from the child welfare system have almost all experienced neglect, abuse, and/or substance exposure in utero, as well as multiple moves among foster homes. Studies on the long-term adjustment of these children after adoption indicate that almost all are well-integrated in their families, but many continue to have more behavior problems than the average child. Several studies consistently find that about 40 percent of child welfare adoptees score in the clinical range on standardized measures of behavioral/emotional problems – that is, the level of children needing mental health services (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992; Rosenthal & Groze, 1994; Howard, et al., 2004).

Despite a greater level of adjustment challenges, over 90 percent of adoptive parents of children from the child welfare system are satisfied with their adoption experiences. In the comparative study of types of adoptive and birth children, there were no significant differences in the percentage of adoptive and biological parents responding that they were not close to their children. In responding to the question, “Knowing what you now know, would you adopt this child again,” very few would not make the same decision again: 5 percent for infant adopters, 3 percent for international adopters, and 7 percent for child welfare adopters (Howard et al., 2004; Smith & Howard, 2002).

Growing up in unstable or unhealthy family environments, along with the trauma of being separated from their biological families and placed into foster care, have a significant impact upon the child’s school readiness and academic capabilities. Children, on average, are about a year behind in achievement at the time they enter foster care, and they continue to be disadvantaged educationally throughout their stay in the child welfare system. A study of the educational experiences of foster children in Illinois indicated they were much more likely to change schools, be retained in a grade, attend lower-performing schools, and be placed in special education classes. Many were identified as having learning disabilities, but their educational needs were not being adequately met. For a variety of reasons – including worker turnover, moves in care, and a split of responsibilities between foster parents and caseworkers – a strong working relationship and communication between school and parent to assist these children often does not occur (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge & Courtney, 2004).

Adoptive parents of children from the child welfare system were more likely to report that their sons and daughters had unmet educational needs (39 percent) than any other type of parent; the comparable rates were 15 percent of birth children, 18 percent of infant adoptees, and 27 percent of international adoptees. Also, child welfare adoptees (26 percent) were much more likely to have repeated one or more grades

than other groups of children, for whom the range was 3 percent to 6 percent (Howard et al., 2004). Often, special diagnostic efforts are needed to tease apart the gaps in these children's learning and development, and to provide the educational services that give them the best chance of academic success.

*"It's a rare week when I don't get several calls from school complaining about at least one of my kids" reported the mother of several children adopted from foster care.*

Complaints from the school and about school from their children are a primary source of stress and challenge for all parents, but particularly for adoptive parents. In a study comparing the adjustment of children living with their birth parents and different types of adopted children, parents of each group of adopted children (infant, international and child welfare adoptees) were two to three times more likely than other parents to give their children low ratings on their overall adjustment at school. However, very few parents of any type reported that children showed poor adjustment at home (Howard et al., 2004).

### **Special considerations in meeting the educational needs of adopted children**

An understanding of the unique situations of all adopted and foster children is critical for meeting their educational needs and facilitating sensitive interventions by teachers and other school professionals. Adopted children may be in open adoption arrangements, having contact with both birth relatives and adoptive relatives. They may come from backgrounds in which they experienced extreme deprivation or abuse, memories of which may be triggered by various school experiences. Teachers, counselors, psychologists, social workers and administrators need specialized knowledge to understand the complexity of issues affecting these children.

For some adopted children, there may be a combination of factors – such as early deprivation, abuse, interrupted attachments or prenatal substance exposure – that influence their development. It may take professionals experienced with this population to adequately assess the capacities and challenges of a particular child. For example, a child may have experienced severe malnutrition in infancy, lead poisoning, neurological damage contributing to impulse-control problems, or have memory and comprehension difficulties stemming from prenatal substance exposure. Educational professionals need to integrate all of these factors into their understanding of that child and create individualized educational plans to assist him or her.

The following realities can complicate serving adopted children at school:

- Because they are rarely provided training relating to adoption, teachers and other professionals often respond to children from the paradigm of a "traditional" family. Furthermore, they may perceive an adopted child in an affluent family to be from a privileged home with well-educated, committed parents; so they may overlook the factors, such as those cited above, that contribute to a child's specific needs.
- Early identification of foundational "holes" in development as a result of early deprivation/neglect, institutional care or other influences is essential to providing interventions to maximize development and learning at the earliest possible point. Often, developmental delays or disabilities are not accurately diagnosed until the end of third grade or later; unfortunately, the period when remediation can be most helpful has often passed for these children. Expert assessments need to occur at very young ages and early intervention has to be provided.
- Children adopted internationally after infancy often did not develop their first languages adequately. Their early adjustment difficulties often may be attributed to their need to acquire English proficiency, so that parents frequently are not aware of their developmental delays. Even though they may have learned conversational English by school age, in the classroom these children sometimes do not have the solid foundation in English to be proficient in academic language (Meese, 2005) and therefore need interventions to perform as well as their classmates.

- Children experiencing significant trauma and deprivation in their early years may have neurological and/or hormonal differences that cause them to be in a state of elevated stress. In situations where they feel challenged, inadequate or afraid, strong defensive reactions can be triggered easily. They frequently lack the capacity to control their emotions and behaviors in the same ways as most children. They need therapeutic parenting and discipline to help them learn to self-regulate their emotions and behaviors and to focus on academics.

The mission of educational professionals is to help all children learn and develop, but they typically have the same knowledge base and biases about adoption and foster care as does the general public, which still harbors negative stereotypes and misconceptions about the adoption itself and about the people (children and adults) that it encompasses. A benchmark survey by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (1997) found that Americans learn about adoption predominantly from media sources: the news (30 percent), books and magazines (16 percent) and movies or entertainment programs (6 percent), followed by family and friends (45 percent) – even though journalists also are not educated about adoption and foster care issues. As a result, even the most well-intentioned educators frequently are not enabled to effectively respond to adopted children with sensitivity and insight.

### **What response is needed from schools?**

In the past, the secrecy and stigma surrounding adoption closed the doors to open and positive communication about the topic in almost every social venue. Today, with the increasing acceptance of adoption as a valued, normal way to form families, everyone needs to have a broader understanding of the people and processes involved. Within the adoption community, children and adults who were adopted, birthparents, adoptive parents and professionals are making it a priority to provide education about their realities.

Most educators are not taught about adoption issues or their impact on children; that, along with the institution's secretive history, can leave them uncertain about what to say at times. The result, when adoption comes up in school, is often silence or inadvertently inappropriate comments. In either case, the opportunity for support and education is lost, while a sense of disapproval or shame may be transmitted to the child.

The school environment is a major contributor to how all children and adolescents feel about their families, their circumstances and themselves. Often, it is not until they enter school that awareness of their differences begins to take shape – whether they are coming to terms with the differences of being part of an adoptive family, a step family or any other “nontraditional” family. There is nothing negative about this recognition; different means neither better nor worse, it simply connotes the varying realities of the many types of families that make up the American landscape today. In the case of adoptees, the awareness of their differences too often is colored by negative comments or attitudes from classmates – and sometimes adults -- regarding their adoptive “status.” These children's self-esteem is strongly impacted by whether the people around them accept adoption as normal and positive.

It is therefore critical for educators to become more knowledgeable about adoption (as they have done already about other sorts of families) so that they can support all their students in an assertive way and can create a positive school environment for and about adoptive families. Informed adults are needed to provide all children with a positive, factual foundation of knowledge about adoption. Teachers can have the greatest influence in making this happen because:

- They are in a consistently influential role,
- Children trust them to have factual, accurate information, and
- Children value and integrate their advice and opinions.

There are many ways to create a positive adoption environment in schools. A program that has been developed to educate school professionals by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), an adoption family support center in Maryland, advances five principles for facilitating an adoption-friendly school environment: acceptance, accuracy, assignments, assistance and advocacy.

**Acceptance:** It is vital to normalize adoption/adoptive families by demonstrating both personal and social acceptance of adoption as one way to build a family, which reflects the main concern of adopted children: "I want it to be okay at school that I am adopted."

Teachers and other school personnel can set the tone for acceptance by the calm, thoughtful comments they make and the responses they give to questions raised regarding adoption, adopted children and adoptive families. Such comments should always send the clear message that adoption is a normal way to form families and, therefore, children should feel comfortable with it.

In addition, teachers can use their communication to direct children's natural curiosity about aspects of adoption away from the personal stories of adoptees in the school. A teacher's confidence in giving information about adoption in a general way helps children understand adoptive families, and models the idea that adoption is most appropriately discussed without attention to personal, individual circumstances.

For example, consider the following exchange between Mrs. Campbell, the teacher, and a third-grade student:

- Child: "Ms. Campbell, did you know that Melissa is adopted from Korea?"  
Teacher: "Yes, I did. Isn't that great? In addition to Korea, many adoptive families have children that come from many different countries like China, Russia, Guatemala and others."  
Child: "How come Melissa is adopted? Where's her real mother?"  
Teacher: "Melissa lives with her real mother! She was here yesterday to pick her up after school. Sometimes children need families because the mothers (and fathers) who gave birth to them could not take care of them. That's a sad time for the biological mothers, but luckily there are people who can help them find forever families for their babies. This is called adoption."

Teachers need to convey acceptance of adoption in their general instruction, not just when responding to specific comments that may arise. While there may be only one or two adopted children in the class – or maybe even none -- the siblings or parents or best friends of some of the students may have been adopted. Acceptance of adoption needs to be conveyed regardless of class composition, just as racial acceptance would be conveyed no matter what races were present in the particular classroom.

**Accuracy:** As with any subject, it is essential to educate students about adoption/adoptive families by providing accurate information at the appropriate time and in an interesting and understandable way. Teachers are encouraged to look for opportunities to incorporate the subject of adoption into their daily lessons. In some ways, adoption is a prism through which to understand all sorts of families.

Since teachers typically do not have any more information about adoption than the general public, factual information needs to be provided in professional education programs, such as being incorporated into courses on diversity in the classroom.

In looking at curriculum, adoption can be discussed in a matter-of-fact way during lessons about:

- Multicultural, blended, or "different" families,
- Genetics or inherited characteristics,
- Recent immigration to the United States,
- History lessons of various sorts, and
- Literature that includes adoption or foster care (such as *Anne of Green Gables*).

For example, after reading a book at school that contains information about adoption, the teacher continues the lesson by saying, "This story is just one example of how prevalent adoption has been for a very long time. Did you all know that there are about six million adopted persons of all ages in our country, and adoption has been a way of building families since ancient days? How many of you knew Moses was adopted?"



Educators also can create special opportunities, such as celebrating National Adoption Awareness Month (November), by highlighting successful adoptees, offering short presentations/lessons about adoption and/or, with permission, highlighting an adoptive family in the school. Or perhaps an adoptive parent, birthparent or adult adoptee might be invited to speak to the class and answer questions.

It is important to always remember that educators do not need to be experts on adoption, any more than they have to be experts on the other family issues they deal with among their students. If a teacher feels unable to answer a question in an informed way, it's fine to offer to research the answer and get back to the student or even to do the research with the student. Students should be told there are many books and resources available on all sorts of families, including adoptive ones.

**Assignments:** It is very important for teachers to be sensitive to school lessons that might be problematical in some way – practically or emotionally – for adopted or foster children – while other lessons may even be inappropriate and need to be altered, given the realities of these children's lives.

Some assignments are particularly hurtful for children who have experienced abuse or neglect, lived in multiple foster placements and/or were adopted at an older age. And most adoptees, regardless of how they were adopted, speak of assignments that are challenging to them, or even upset them, because they may exaggerate the differences in their backgrounds from their peers, reveal private information, and/or highlight information they simply do not have. These include:

- Family trees
- Autobiographies
- Lessons on genetics/inherited traits
- Mother's Day or Father's Day
- Timelines of their lives
- Baby pictures
- Birth data and medical history
- Sex education
- Family heritage and history

Assignments need to be broadened and offered in a variety of ways, so that it's possible for all children to complete them. For example, consider the following response of a child given an assignment to bring a baby picture to class.

*"I don't know what to do" said first-grader Teresa to her mom. "Mrs. Bell wants us to bring in our baby pictures tomorrow for a class project. How do I tell them I don't have a baby picture? All the other kids probably do." Teresa began to cry.*

Adopted children may lack photos of their early lives, particularly if they were adopted from orphanages in other countries. Many adoptees have very little information about their beginnings. So, in the example described above, teachers can alter the assignment to ask students for any picture they wish to share about themselves.

Another popular class assignment, the family tree, can be vexing for adopted and foster children, creating discomfort about leaving out significant birth relatives or confusion about how to respond. When turned into a family orchard (or another configuration such as family circles), the result better reflects and serves the realities of children in adoptive or foster families, step families, divorced families, families headed by one parent, and other family forms that comprise the majority of today's American families.

**Assistance:** Teachers need to identify appropriate boundaries and language about adoption/adoptive families. They also should be prepared to intervene and lend support to an adopted child when other students ask questions or make comments that might be intrusive and/or hurtful, even if unintentionally.

For example, Sam, age 11, reported: "I am so tired of kids asking me, "What happened to your real mom?" His teacher might intervene in the following manner.

Classmate to adoptee: "What happened to your real mom? Didn't she want you?"  
Teacher: "Sam lives with his real mom, Tom – she adopted him when he was very little. You mean his biological mother. She probably couldn't care for Sam for some reason and wanted to be sure he'd be in a forever, loving family. But that's all personal information, so Sam may want to keep it private. Why don't we hold an open circle with the class to discuss privacy, okay?"

Stigma is even more of a problem for foster children, who may be teased and bullied. Often, they may try to keep their status a secret from classmates and may become withdrawn or isolated to shield themselves from unwanted attention (Vera Institute, 2003). It is especially important for teachers to facilitate inclusion for these children and to assist them in becoming integrated in their peer group at school.

**Advocacy:** The goal here is to ensure that the school will take action to support students in adoptive families if comments and questions about adoption become invasive or negative. Just as schools have clear policies/rules on bullying, sexual harassment and racial discrimination, negative/hurtful behavior such as taunting/teasing with regard to a student's type of family must be explicitly prohibited as well.

An attack on children's families – whether intended or the result of inadvertently negative language – strikes at the core of their being. It is harmful, undermining and overwhelming. Adopted children, like their peers in other types of families, need to be able to rely on educators to enforce policies that protect them from this kind of adversity. All children grow stronger and more confident when they know their schools will support them. Some outrageous comments that adoptees have shared include:

- You were ugly and still are, and that is why your mother did not keep you.
- All people from South America do drugs. I bet your real father was a druggie.
- You can't be like us, your parents are white.
- Look at that kid acting up, I bet he's adopted (he wasn't).

Educators must be prepared to step in, hold explanatory "open circles," and/or enforce the same kind of disciplinary actions that would apply to comparably unacceptable behavior if it related to a child's gender, race, religion, ethnicity or disability. It cannot be overstated that schools need a clear policy stating that harassment or insensitivity about foster care, adoption or other family forms will not be tolerated.

Children who have experienced compromised beginnings – such as institutional care, prenatal drug exposure and/or abusive or neglectful home environments – may face developmental, neurological and psychological issues that require responsive, timely and specialized interventions. Too often, they are misdiagnosed or under-diagnosed due to a lack of understanding about the effects of such issues. Educators and other school professionals may need to advocate for services on behalf of children and their families within the educational arena. Historically, the general response parents often receive from educators is: "Let's wait a while and see what happens. Maybe they will grow out of all of this; time will tell." However well-intentioned that advice may be, it does not provide the best scenario for the well-being of children and their opportunities for academic success; only early remediation can accomplish that goal.

In growing numbers, adoptive parents with children who have special needs are seeking collaborative relationships with schools to assess and develop appropriate educational plans. Needless to say, many students have experiences before and after adoption that result in complex and multiple influences shaping their educational abilities. Educational planning must include the integration of accurate information about those experiences and interpretation by adoption-knowledgeable educators. Sometimes, it is beneficial to include specialists in the assessment process who are familiar with adoption. The key is a team approach to ensure that the students' educational needs are being met to optimize their chances for success. Some of the needed services are costly for school systems so in addition to advocacy, knowledge of legal entitlements and rights may be required to secure the services needed by a particular child.

Educators who have been exposed to “adoption-competent learning” have become powerful, effective advocates for students who once had no voice and no one to speak for them. The following acknowledgement by Jasmine, who was 9 at the time of a counseling session, exemplifies this advocacy:

*“I switched from so many schools while I was in foster care. No one knew me and no one seemed to care. I hated school ‘cause I was always failing. I couldn’t read like everyone else. I felt so stupid. Why try when you know you will be moving on? Things are different for me now. I got adopted and my parents are working with my school. I have to do some tests, but my teacher says it will help them help me. Finally, someone is helping!!! Maybe one day I will like school and school will like me.”*

### **Promising initiatives**

In response to barriers to positive experiences at school that have been identified for adopted and foster children, a range of special programs have been created around the country. Some of these programs flourish for a few years but are not sustained, often due to funding issues. Many are run by volunteers, including adoptive parents, and are able to make a difference one classroom at a time. Others have broader initiatives and more systemic plans; among them are:

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) has developed an array of programs and resources, and has built a variety of educational support services within its service-delivery model for adoptive families, including a team of adoption-competent therapists who are proficient in the areas of school advocacy and special education. Therapists may attend school meetings with parents to explore placement and remediation services, for example. C.A.S.E. also provides workshops for parents to build skills in educational advocacy. It provides an in-service program for teachers based on the S.A.F.E. at School Manual (2003). C.A.S.E. has trained over 2,000 educators locally and nationally on this model, which seeks to normalize adoption in school and teach appropriate ways to communicate about adoption.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, through its Educate the Educators Program, provides materials and trainings for individual classrooms, parents and school systems. The objective of the Institute’s model training program is to explain the key issues about adoption for education professionals and parents, including how to ensure that language, lesson plans and other aspects of school do not stigmatize adopted, foster and other children – or inadvertently undermine their families – as well as to generate greater sensitivity and provide further insights into how to place all children on a level playing field, regardless of the type of family in which they live.

Families Adopting in Response (FAIR), an adoption support organization in California, has compiled *Adoption and the Schools*, a 256-page book that offers resources for parents and teachers. It was first published in 1993 and has been expanded in subsequent editions, most recently in 2002. It includes suggestions for educators working with youth from kindergarten through high school age (Wood & Ng, 2002). Adoptive parents from FAIR also provide trainings for educators, parents and social service professionals related to adoption awareness and sensitivity.

Several state child welfare systems also have instituted statewide efforts. One noteworthy example is an effort in Illinois aimed specifically at educational advocacy for foster and adopted children. The Department of Children and Family Services began partnering with the Center for Child Welfare and Education at Northern Illinois University in 1997 to conduct research on the needs of foster children in the schools and to develop solutions. Two of the resulting programs are a training initiative for foster and adoptive parents on educational advocacy and a statewide system of professional educational advisors and advocates.

There have been other state initiatives to address educational needs of foster children, primarily to provide for school continuity when children change placements, timely sharing of records and other information, and collaborative communication between the child welfare and educational systems. Some state departments of education have funded special services – the Massachusetts Department of

Education provides grants to localities to address issues facing foster children, for instance; California passed a bill (AB 490) requiring each local educational agency to designate a staff person as a liaison for foster children; and in Charlotte, North Carolina, the county child welfare and school systems fund a joint position for a school psychologist to serve as a liaison between the two agencies (Christian, 2006).

Connecticut's Department of Children and Families contracts in each region of the state with educational consultants to consult with caseworkers and foster parents, conduct special testing, and advocate in the schools for foster children. In Seattle, a private agency, Treehouse, focuses on educational services to foster children in three programs: tutoring, advocacy and coaching youth to go to college (Casey Family Programs, 2004). Casey Family Programs also funds special initiatives around the U.S. to address educational needs of foster children.

## Conclusion

The approaches described above are primarily efforts to work on a case-by-case basis with individual schools or families to facilitate positive situations and outcomes for children. More systemic solutions, such as those recommended early in this brief, are needed in order to ensure positive school experiences for all adopted children. In particular, educational professionals need to learn in their professional training – starting in the curricula in their colleges – about the reality of adoption and foster care today and the specific needs of the children involved.

What we are suggesting is comparable to, and no more difficult than, the steps educators already take in other areas, for other children. The ultimate goal is simple: to level the playing field so that all boys and girls receive equal treatment in the classroom and the best possible prospects of succeeding in school.

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