

Information for Educators/School Personnel on Adoption

Developed by Concerned Persons for Adoption (CPFA)

www.cpfanj.org

Need to understand adoption/foster care issues

‘Crash course’ in adoption/foster care today

Adoption Language – how to refer to adoption

Adoption issues at different ages/ how to handle

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Need to Understand Adoption/Foster Care Issues

“In first and second grade it was always family, family. Just the simple exercise of drawing a picture of your family – I felt I wasn’t able to be real about it. Labeling them my mother, father, sister, brother....it was a lie” (an adoptee)

Whether you know it or not, chances are there are adopted or foster care children in your classrooms. The statistics reveal the following: There are over 500,000 children living in foster care nationally and 340,000 of them are school-aged. (Children’s Bureau, 2007). 1 in 25 households with children has at least one adopted child. (2006 Census). Annually there are approximately 50,000 children adopted from foster care, 20,000 adopted internationally, and 13,000 infants adopted domestically. In New Jersey alone, there are approximately 12,000 children in foster care, over half of which are school-aged.

Adoption does not cause problems! It is supposed to be ‘the answer.’ But for children who are or were in the foster care system, the chance is high that they have suffered from any or all of the following:

- abuse or neglect
- separation from parent or parents
- multiple placements (an average of 3 while in foster care)
- witnessing domestic violence
- multiple school placements

All of the above can add to post-traumatic stress syndrome and/or mental health problems....and understandably to difficulty in attention and educational achievement. The University of Maryland School of Medicine’s Center for School Mental Health issued a paper on Foster Care and School Mental Health in January 2009 which elaborates on these issues and offers links to a variety of resources for educators. See <http://csmh.umaryland.edu/resources.html/FosterCareBrief.pdf>

Nationally there are 6 million children living in households headed by a grandparent or other relative. ***Kinship care*** is now a commonly used, legal arrangement for children needing permanency. For more information log onto www.kinkonnect.org and/or www.schoolmentalhealth.org/Resources/FostCare/EducFost and click on kinship care link.

For children who were adopted internationally additional challenges can come from institutional care, loss of primary language or changes in culture. Obviously each case is different depending on the length and quality of care received and the age at adoption among other factors.

Beyond these numbers and issues, an awareness of the different family circumstances of your students can ease the comfort (and therefore learning ability) of many more of your students – those with disabilities, gay parents, step parents, single parent situations....and so many more.

It is simply a matter of honoring differences, and not making any child feel ‘less’ than ‘normal.’

‘Crash Course’ in Adoption/Foster Care Today

Every adoption story is different depending on the age of the child, the degree of openness, the place of birth/adoption, the involvement of agencies, lawyers, etc. But some generalizations can be made and the following explanations can help summarize the world of adoption today:

Domestic Adoption – the adoption of a child born in the US by adoptive parents in the US.

International Adoption – the adoption of a child from another country than the US by adoptive parents in the US. Many of these children are in orphanages, some in foster care.

Types of Domestic Adoption:

Agency: Birth and adoptive parents work through an adoption agency

Private: Birth and adoptive parents locate each other privately (through ads or third party contacts) & work through an attorney.

Identified: Birth and adoptive parents locate each other privately, but then use an agency for counseling and legal work.

Child Welfare or Foster Care Adoption: Any adoption of a child through the state child welfare system (Division of Youth and Family Services – DYFS in New Jersey). In these cases, the rights of the birth parents have been relinquished or terminated and all contact is through the division.

Intermediary – Someone who introduces a birthparent to a prospective adoptive parent. Can be a doctor, lawyer, clergy, teacher, or anyone. It is legal in NJ but the intermediary must not receive any payment.

Degrees of Openness – in a closed adoption the agency does the placement and there is no contact between the birthparents and the adoptive parents. This is rarely done anymore. In an open adoption, the birthparent chooses the adoptive parent, meets and has continuing contact. Most adoptions fall in between these two.

Open Records – Several states have passed laws allowing adoptees of legal age to obtain their original birth certificates. NJ has legislation pending which would open its adoption records. See www.nj-care.org for current information on this effort.

Adoption Triad – the triad consists of birthparents, adoptee, and adoptive parent or parents.

Rights of Birthparents (SAME for birthfathers as for birthmothers) –

- to get counseling and NOT be pressured
- get help with medical and birth related expenses
- choose their baby’s adoptive parents
- change their mind after the birth of the baby (until relinquishments are final)
- request photos and periodic reports of the baby
- pass along photos & letters for the baby
- talk to other birthparents
- a safe, legal and efficient process

- assume the agency will place the baby if born with problems (in agency adoption only)
- send the agency updated medical information

Adoption Language – How to Refer to Adoption

“Do you have any children of your own?” (question to an adoptive parent IN FRONT OF her adopted children!)

“So, where is your real mom?” (question to an 8 year old adoptee at school)

Language can hurt. Insensitive language can imply a negative connotation which can be picked up by an adopted or foster child of ANY age.....and by classmates as well!

The following simple suggestions can be helpful:

<u>USE</u>	<u>NOT</u>
Birth (or biological) parent	Real parent (or natural parent)
Made an adoption plan	‘Put up’ for adoption (or gave away)
Your child	Your adopted child
International adoption	Foreign adoption
Sponsor – a – tree (or whatever)	Adopt – a – tree (or whatever)
Birth (or biological) child	Real child (or natural child or your own child)

Adoption Issues at Different Ages/ Ideas on How to Handle

*“A kid’s biggest fear is being different. But WHO SETS THE STANDARD?
Where do kids learn this stuff?” (an adoptee)*

Preschoolers usually feel good about adoption, but may have some confusion. (My daughter went to kindergarten convinced that *every* child is adopted.) This is a good time for a parent to visit the classroom and read a book about adoption or share some basics about their own experience.

Elementary grade students may begin to feel different and self-conscious, noting that most kids are NOT adopted. If they look different from their parents they may be very aware that most kids resemble their parents...in looks and/or attributes. The adopted student will need to answer questions from their peers and may experience teasing regarding their ‘real’ parents, etc. It is important for educators to be proactive at this time – mentioning adoptive families in a positive, normal way, helping kids deflect questions that are too probing, respecting a child’s privacy, and not putting any child on the spot, expecting them to ‘represent’ their birth country or culture. This is also a time when, developmentally, children become aware that there is a sad side to adoption...a loss of birth family, perhaps a loss of birth country. Depending on the situation, there may or may not be any contact or knowledge of the birth family. Grieving this loss in no way diminishes an adoptee’s love for his adoptive family. Educators need to be aware of this complex emotional situation and the child’s developing struggle to deal with it.

Middle school/junior high school students feel a strong need to ‘fit in.’ This can be complicated for a foster or adopted child. It can be especially difficult for a tranracially or transculturally adopted child whose physical characteristics might ‘place’ them in one ethnic group, but whose family experiences, culture, and language, might place them in another.

For a child whose body is beginning to change dramatically (with no idea or ‘blueprint’ as to what she might look like in the future) this is a confusing time in any case. Educators should mention adoptive families at appropriate times, with current positive adoption language, and generally be aware of and available to a child who might need some support.

In **High School students** need to develop their own identity and begin to ‘separate’ themselves from their parents. For foster and adopted kids this can be complicated by the fact of having two sets of parents, one of which they may or may not know anything about. Think what it would be like if you did not know a single human being on earth biologically related to you! Also, many adoptees (and foster children especially) at this age have a fear of leaving home, having already suffered multiple losses.

The subject of adoption might well come up in high school because of a movie or talk show or perhaps a classmate with an unplanned pregnancy. Many pregnant teens either keep their baby or choose abortion and may be very critical of adoption. Teens tend not to think long term and generally do not choose adoption for their baby (most birthmothers choosing adoption are older). Such thinking can cause foster and adopted teens to wonder why *their* birthparents didn’t choose to keep and raise them!

Educators must be prepared and proactive in discussing adoption whenever it comes up and certainly as part of a family life curriculum. If not knowledgeable, be sure to either research the

topic properly and/or invite professionals in for a presentation. Panel discussions with adoptive parents, birth parents, adoptees and/or adoption professionals can be very helpful.

What Schools Can Do

“The only time I ever felt comfortable was in junior year of high school when my teacher gave us an option – instead of doing a family tree, we could interview a Holocaust survivor. She was aware of the fact that people might not have all the information on their family (or want to share it). That there are all types of complications – single parents, divorced situations, gay parents...many different reasons why a child might feel different, many different ways in which they might not have the ‘nuclear family’ structure.” (an adoptee)

Teachers, school social workers, guidance counselors, school nurses, aides...all educators have a heavy influence on a child’s self-esteem and on how all children view other children – including foster or adopted ones. Their comments (or lack of them) go a long way in forming the attitudes of their charges. Therefore we would hope that all educators would be **accepting, accurate, intervene if necessary, understand how adoption impacts students at various ages, broaden assignment options that could otherwise be problematic, advocate for any special needs resulting from early experiences...i.e., make ALL kids feel more comfortable, so they can maximize their learning experience!**

Accepting...from reading a book about an adopted family, to including literature in English classes that involves the topic, to simply referring to adoption as a matter-of-fact, perfectly good way to form a family...there are unlimited ways that teachers and educators can present a positive image of adoption and foster care. In reality, the topic is often avoided, either due to the discomfort or the lack of knowledge on the part of the educator, leaving the students to draw their own conclusions about kids that seem ‘different.’ After speaking to high school health classes in our Adoption Awareness program, it was so satisfying when adopted students would come up to us afterwards and thank us for talking about it...for ‘normalizing’ adoption. Equally satisfying were comments from the teenage boys like, “they really seemed to love their adopted child” or even “yeah, maybe I would consider adoption someday, either as a birthparent or an adoptive one.” Let’s not wait until high school to normalize it!

Accurate...with movies and talk shows and news stories circulating about disrupted adoptions, emotional search and reunions, adoption scams and more, it is important that students get accurate, up-to-date information from their educators. What we saw in high school health classes was that adoption was one of many topics ‘available’ for choosing for research papers. Then, whatever the student presented to the class was the sum total of covering the topic. At the very least, students should be directed to reliable resources (hence this website) for their research.

But again, let’s not wait until high school to mention it!

Intervene if necessary...schools these days have a clear policy on bullying, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment. Inherent in this should be a policy on teasing regarding family situations. Once again, this refers to all students – whether in ‘traditional’ families, single parent families, step families, gay and lesbian families, or families of different religions or cultures. All children should feel safe and respected. And their privacy regarding these issues should be protected. A good teacher or social worker could step in to deflect a probing question or negative comment by a

classmate by reaffirming the child’s right to privacy AND by switching the conversation to a more general and positive one about the issue of adoption or foster care, or whatever.

Understand how adoption impacts students at different ages...see previous section on “Adoption Issues at Different Ages/Ideas on How to Handle”.

Broaden assignment options that could otherwise be problematic...as one adopted child said, every time that we had to write about our family or birth, or draw a family tree, “I felt like I was shrinking down into my rabbit hole again....I literally slinked down in my seat, feeling that everyone in the class was looking at me.”

Assignments that point out differences in children, or reveal information that should remain private, or ask for information or photos that some children (not just adopted ones) are totally unable to provide because they either do not exist or they do not have access to them...only serve to embarrass or cause them to shut down...or act out. Yet all of these can be easily avoided simply by providing options. Students can still learn about genetics, relationships, different cultures without making certain students feel bad. Some options:

<u>Instead of</u>	<u>Why not</u>
bringing in baby photos	bring in photos from when you were younger
‘student of the week’ highlighting a child’s history	let it highlight their current life –hobbies, pets, etc.
autobiographies	autobiographies of <i>anyone</i> in their family
cultural celebrations	let them choose a country, don’t assume the child from China wants to ‘do’ China
family tree	many possibilities for this ‘infamous’ assignment see www.adoptivefamilies.org/school for alternative formats, or offer more creative options like interviewing a well-known person in town or a war veteran, etc.
time lines	of a parent, or of a country, or of any time period of their life – <i>not necessarily beginning at birth!</i>
genetics	use insects, or plants, or historical information re inherited diseases, etc. Again it shouldn’t have to be personal for them in order to learn about genetics.

Advocate for any special needs resulting from early experiences (as should be done for any student)... according to Joyce Maquire Pavao, PhD, an internationally renowned expert on adoption, in any population of learning disabled children, about 28% will be adopted. There have been many theories as to why this should be so. It is very important, however, to realize that

adoption is not the problem...the problem is in the early experiences of the child. Just some of those experiences for foster and adopted kids can include:

- institutionalization
- poor pre-natal care
- genetic predisposition
- parental abuse
- prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol
- disruption of care (from birth to foster to another foster or institution...)
- language difficulties (with older, international adoptees)
- sense of loss and rejection

None of these are the ‘faults’ of the child or the adoptive parent. Any of them would effect anyone’s ability to learn. As with any learning disability, it is the responsibility of the educators to identify the problem and work with the parents, the child study team and other professionals in order to maximize the child’s potential.

To sum up, some careful thought beforehand on the part of educators can allow ALL students to feel more comfortable...so they CAN learn!

What Parents Can Do

“The adoptive parents love their kids and are totally positive about adoption. But no matter what the parents say, they have to prepare their child that others may not be as comfortable, or as positive, about it” (an adoptee)

Obviously adoptive parents should be open with their children, discuss adoption/foster care in general as well as the specific facts of their own story. Support groups can help parents at every stage of the journey as well as the many, many books on adoptive parenting (see the sources listed under ‘What Adoptees Can Do’). Adoptive parents also need to realize that no matter how much they love their children or how ‘blind’ they are to the racial or cultural differences in their family, the outside world (at school, the playground, the supermarket...) are *not* in the same place and can be very insensitive in their remarks. In the book “Beyond Good Intentions” Cheri Register reflects on the mistakes she made in raising internationally adopted children – believing race doesn’t matter, suppressing anger and sorrow, appropriating our child’s heritage, etc. Written for international adoptions, it is actually pertinent to almost all adoptions.

On a more pro-active level, many adoptive parents choose to give presentations at their child’s school. This can range from simply reading a book about adoption to a classroom of young children, to giving a more formal presentation, answering questions, or having a panel of members of the adoption triad, for older students. In *all* cases, it is vital that your child be ok with your coming into his school for this purpose.

For comprehensive guidelines and suggestions on parent presentations on adoption in schools the following sources are excellent:

www.adoptivefamilies.com/school

Adoption and the Schools, see www.fairfamilies.org

For many years CPFA offered an adoption awareness program to New Jersey high school health classes. Two adoptive parents would present their own stories to individual classes, and by so doing, explain how adoption works today, what the rights of birthparents are, how adoption has become much more open, etc. Our program was covered in a story in Adoptive Families magazine and is currently described in the Adoption and the Schools book, page 122. While this program was very satisfying, and did a lot to ‘normalize’ adoption for the adoptees in the classes, as well as enlighten the other students to the possibility of adoption in their own lives, it was also very labor-intensive. Ideally, health educators should be learning about adoption in their teacher preparation classes.

One other excellent way to educate students about adoption is to help your school library to be ‘adoption-friendly.’ Make sure the books they do have on the topic do not portray adoption in an outdated or negative way. Suggest that appropriate books on the topic could be highlighted in November for National Adoption Awareness Month. Donate some good books on foster care and adoption. Again, look at the resources for ordering books under the following section or contact NJARCH for age-appropriate suggestions.

What Adoptees Can Do

“Just being told that you’re different (pointed out by a girlfriend in 1st grade) before I was comfortable about it – was devastating to me for the next 8 years. She didn’t say it like, wow, that’s so cool, I wish I was adopted...I could tell, even at that early age, that there was something bad about it.” (an adoptee)

Truly the responsibility of preparing a child to face these issues falls upon the parents, not the child. No child *should have to* deal with teasing, bullying, embarrassing assignments, racism or prying questions. However, the reality is they probably *will have to* face some or all of these, so the more prepared they are, the better.

It is of course important that the lines of communication between the adoptive or foster parent and the child remain open and that the child feels knowledgeable about and comfortable about asking questions regarding their foster/adoptive situation. At the same time, it is important that the child understand that they have a right to keep their story private. In interracial or intercountry adoption, the obvious differences may “shout adoption” out to the world, but the details of their particular story can still be kept private.

One of the best programs/aids for adopted children – empowering them to know how to handle questions – is the W.I.S.E. Up! Program from The Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. See www.adoptionsupport.org . Simple workbooks (including one for foster children) and posters can be obtained from their website, showing the four options for adoptees when faced with prying questions:

W – Walk away

I – It’s private – you don’t want to share it; say no and change the subject

S- Share something – choose some information to share

E- Educate them! – by telling them correct information

The more a child is aware of the facts about adoption, the prevalence of it, the famous people who were adopted or have adopted...the more they are exposed to other adoptees, the more comfortable they will be in these situations. Adoptive parent support groups usually have social events for the entire families.

The following are some of many well known people who are adopted:

Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy’s

Scott Hamilton, figure skater

Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers and owner of Pixar

Halle Berry, actress

Gerald Ford & Bill Clinton, former presidents

Langston Hughes, poet

There are tons of books that explain adoption for children...books about both domestic and international adoption, transracial adoption, getting an adopted sibling, foster care, single parent families, etc. The following are sources for finding listings, reviews, and books for sale or, in the case of NJARCH, for borrowing:

NJARCH – www.njarch.org or call 877-4ARCH NJ (877-427-2465)

Tapestry Books – www.tapestrybooks.com

PACT – www.pactadopt.org – esp. good for transracial adoption

EMK Press – www.emkpress.com
Come Unity – www.comeunity.com –book reviews
Perspectives Press – www.perspectivespress.com

Resources and Support for All

Local Organizations:

Support Groups for Adoptive Families – these are helpful not only for people interested in adopting, but also for the entire journey of raising adopted children. **Concerned Persons for Adoption (CPFA)** was founded in 1972 and has been providing support and education around adoption issues ever since, with programs on parenting and social events. We can be contacted at www.cpfanj.org. For other NJ support groups contact NJARCH, listed next.

NJARCH – New Jersey’s Adoption Resource Clearinghouse – they provide adoption advocacy, support, education and information and referral to anyone interested in adoption. They maintain a huge lending library of adoption related books which can be borrowed for free. They also have a warmline at 877-4ARCHNJ (1-877-427-2465). See www.njarch.org

National Organizations:

Casey Family Programs – hdqtrs-1300 Dexter Ave North, Floor 3, Seattle, WA 98109. 206-282-7300. A national operating foundation serving children in the child welfare system. Has many resources for parents and professionals working with youth in care. See www.casey.org

C.A.S.E. –Center for Adoption Education and Support –offices in Burtonsville and Bethesda, Maryland as well as Burke, Virginia. Publishes the W.I.S.E. Up! curriculum to empower adopted children and Safe at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, conducts training for school personnel, and offers counseling. See www.adoptionssupport.org

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute – 120 E 38th St, New York, NY 10016, 212-925-4089. Adam Pertman, Executive Director, author of “Adoption Nation.” This non-profit, independent organization conducts research, issues papers to improve policy and practice, provides educational programs, and serves as an advocate for ethical adoption on the federal and state levels. See www.adoptioninstitute.org

Books for educators:

Adoption and the Schools. Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng, ed. Families Adopting in Response (FAIR). A 260 page manual with the following chapters: Crib Notes: Adoption 101, Tot to Teen: Developmental Perspectives, ‘Can We Talk?’ Parent-Teacher Communication, ‘I Can’t Do It!’ Problematic Assignments, Activities and Occasions, In the Spotlight: Presentations for Schools and Classrooms, ‘Is That Your Mom?’ Transcultural Considerations, ‘Help!’ Special Educational Challenges, Better Late than Never: The Older Child Enters School, Experts Speak: Personal Reflections on Adoption, ‘More, Please!’ Additional Resources. See www.fairfamilies.org

Adoption Awareness in School Assignments: A Guide for Parents and Educators. Christine Mitchell.

A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care. Casey Family Programs. Available as a pdf download at www.casey.org or as a 174 page book free of charge from Casey. Provides educational recommendations, promising practices, handouts, checklists, and most importantly resources for helping the educational outcome for all children in out of home care.

S.A.F.E. at School: A Manual for Teachers and Counselors. Marilyn Schoettle, M.A., The Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE), Inc. An 82 page, comprehensive manual with the following chapters: Students' Developmental Understanding of Adoption, 5 Proactive Ways to Create a Positive Adoption Environment in Your School, Adopted Students and Unique Educational Needs, Adoptive Families Today, and Tools for Your Work. See www.adoptionsupport.org

W.I.S.E. Up Powerbook. A useful program that can empower children to answer questions about their adoptions. (Also available is one for foster care). See www.adoptionsupport.org

Note: There are tons of helpful, appropriate books for children who are adopted, in foster care, or have an adopted sibling and for foster and adoptive parents. See www.njarch.org under resources or contact them at 1-877-427-2465 for suggestions.

Online Articles & Resources:

Adoption Clubhouse – See www.adoptionclubhouse.org – serves as a peer adoption community for children ages 8-13, as well as offering information for parents, siblings and teachers.

Adoption in the Schools: A Lot to Learn – Policy Perspective of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. See www.adoptioninstitute.org This is a comprehensive 13 page paper on such topics as: Issues influencing school adjustment among adopted and foster children, Special considerations in meeting the educational needs of adopted children, What response is needed from schools.

Adoptive Families Magazine – See www.adoptivefamilies.com/school This is a collection of articles and advice from their magazine on school issues, sample presentations, and school assignment suggestions.

When More Help is Needed

In any family setting there are times when an impartial, third party voice can help. When adoption/foster care issues are involved, it is important that the therapist have an understanding of those issues so as not to 1) blame everything on adoption or 2) discount those very issues.

Both NJARCH and CPFA maintain resource lists of therapists who are trained in adoption/foster care issues. For NJARCH's list see www.njarch.org and click on resources. For CPFA's list contact info@cpfanej.org and your request will be forwarded to our Older Child Advocate who maintains the listing. Please understand that we do not/cannot recommend any particular therapist. All descriptive information has been provided by the therapists themselves.

In many cases, attending an adoptive parent support group can be very helpful to the whole family. CPFA, for example, offers educational programs, a CHAT room for one-on-one help, social events for the entire family where kids can see other adopted kids, our annual conference at Rutgers University in November, as well as a network of experienced adoptive parents. (see events calendar in main menu) If our Morris County location is not geographically convenient, contact NJARCH for another support group.

New Initiatives

Rutgers Certificate Program in Adoption- geared towards mental health professionals working with adoption issues, this program, in its entirety, or as individual courses, is open to anyone, including educators, school social workers or counselors. 7 required and 2 elective workshops (total 45 continuing education hours) must be completed to receive a final certificate. Topics include: psychology of adoption, behavior management, children with sexual behavior problems, trans-racial adoption issues, impact of deprivation and trauma, and various clinical and therapy topics. This program is offered through the Institute for Families, School of Social Work, Rutgers University. For more information, call Doug Behan, LCSW, Director, at 732-445-3173 X193.

Educate the Educators and **Educate the Media** – two new programs of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute include trainings and materials to improve practices by teachers and journalists. See www.adoptioninstitute.org

School Support Groups – a few school social workers have initiated support groups for students who are adopted or in foster care. They have met with varying success. This could be helpful, but it is critical that the facilitator be knowledgeable about adoption issues. Speakers can be brought in such as older adoptees who can serve as mentors.

Educational Needs – Several states (Illinois, Massachusetts, California, North Carolina, Connecticut & Washington) have begun a variety of programs to address the educational needs of foster children. For children who move around it is vital that some continuity be maintained and that the schools and child welfare systems cooperate. Much more work is needed in this area. (as noted in the Evan B. Donaldson policy perspective on Adoption in the Schools, 2006).