Adoption Basics for Educators:

How Adoption Impacts Children & How Educators Can Help

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Introduction to Adoption Booklet for Educators

As educators enter the schools of the 21st century, they are encountering an increasingly diverse population of students. Students are not only coming from different ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, but also from varied family situations, including adoptive families. Adoptive families can exhibit considerable diversity, including infant, international, older child, sibling group, kinship, and special needs. Regardless of the type of adoption, most adopted children deal with emotional issues surrounding adoption. Unless educators have a personal connection with adoption, they may not understand how these issues impact their students and affect students' school performances.

This booklet was 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.

A Brief History of Adoption

Adoption has existed in some form since earliest recorded history. When parents died, or for other reasons were unable to parent their offspring, children often were raised by friends or relatives without intervention from the legal system. Formal adoptions, consisting of the legal transfer of parental rights from birth families to adoptive parents and the rights of inheritance conferred upon the adopted children, have been documented as far back as Babylonian times.

Adoption also has been common since the earliest days of U.S. history. Adopted children were used as labor on farms and plantations in the 1700s. Orphaned and homeless children were placed in adoptive homes during the Industrial Revolution. More recently, the famed "orphan trains" of the late 19th and early 20th centuries transported needy youngsters from eastern cities to adoptive homes in rural areas of the Midwest.

Adoption Today

In the mid-20th century, the practice of closing and sealing adoption records from the public began as an act to "protect" children from the scandal of illegitimacy. In recent years, many adoptees, parents, and professionals have begun to question this practice. Consequently, one of the current trends is to move away from traditional adoptions toward "open" adoptions, which allows the parties involved to share information and sometimes to have direct contact.

This is just one of the reasons why adoption is very different and more prevalent today than it was even ten to fifteen years ago. Between five and six million adoptees live in our country at the present time. Each adoptee has birth parents and adoptive parents. Many have adoptive and biological siblings, as well as extended families and close friends. As a result, the number of persons directly affected by adoption is large. A study completed by the Evan B. Donaldson Institute in 1997 found that sixty percent of the population in the United States has a personal connection with adoption. Either they, a close family member, or a close friend are adopted, have adopted, or have placed a child for adoption.

Sixty percent of the population in the U.S. has a personal connection with adoption.

Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 1997.

Recent trends in our society, including increased drug and alcohol use, have led to more children being placed in foster care. In the past, many of these children remained in foster care for years, but in the late 1990s federal legislation mandated that children who cannot be returned to their birth homes within a certain time frame must be legally freed for adoption. This has been the catalyst to ever-increasing numbers of adoptions. Many of the children currently being placed for adoption are older, and most have experienced abuse and/or neglect while in the care of their birth parents.

These children bring new challenges, not only to their adoptive parents but also to others who have contact with them on a regular basis. School-age

children typically spend more time interacting with school personnel than anyone other than the immediate family. As more adopted children enter the classroom bringing with them specific issues and challenges related to adoption and to their personal history prior to adoption, educators may find it helpful to become informed about adoption issues in order to help each child perform to his or her maximum potential.

The issues and challenges will be unique to each child based upon their past social and genetic history; however, some of these issues impact nearly all adopted children. We have attempted to compile a brief overview of some of the issues common to adopted children along with some suggested ways that educators can help the adopted children with whom they have contact.

In past decades, it was common not to tell children they were adopted until adulthood, if at all. Currently, however, most parents talk to their children about their adoption from the earliest years. Children who are adopted at an older age may have memories of living with their birth families. Therefore, it would be unusual for a teacher today to encounter a student who is unaware of his or her adoption. An individual child's understanding of adoption, of course, varies according to age and developmental level.

Children's Understanding of Adoption

Preschool

Preschoolers do not yet fully understand reproduction and do not understand the concept of "being born." Although they probably have had conversations about adoption with their parents and may have been told that they were adopted, they cannot usually differentiate between being adopted and being born into a family. Because of this lack of understanding, preschoolers and toddlers who were adopted as infants seldom exhibit adoption-related adjustment problems. Children who were somewhat older when they left the birth home may remember their birth parents, and depending upon the circumstances surrounding their move from the birth home to the adoptive home, may exhibit adjustment problems related to the move.

Early Elementary

Usually by age six or seven, children begin to have some understanding of reproduction and can understand that they grew inside one woman who gave birth to them, and that they now live with other parents. By this age, and throughout the early elementary years, adopted children usually begin to have a fuller understanding of adoption and the issues of loss and abandonment that accompany that understanding. They may begin to think and fantasize about their birth parents. They likely have questions about why they were placed for adoption. These thoughts and questions require mental energy, can make it difficult for some children to concentrate in school, and can lead to changes in behavior. Although each adopted child reacts differently, it is not uncommon for an adopted child to go through a grieving process, which can include stages of denial, anger, and sadness. This grieving process may recur at various stages in the child's development.

Upper Elementary

Children in later elementary years may think even more about what being adopted means. Self-esteem is important at this age, and adopted children must incorporate an adopted status into their self-image. Any issue, including adoption, that makes them "different" from their peers can be a source of anxiety. They may have concerns that

their peers or others may think less of them because they are adopted. They continue to wonder about the reasons their birth parents placed them for adoption and whether or not their adoptive parents love them as they would a biological child.

Adolescence By the time most children reach adolescence, they can think abstractly, which allows them to understand legalities and reasons why birth parents place children for adoption. As adolescents make the transition from childhood into adulthood, they begin to find their own identities and begin the process of separation from their parents. For adopted children, finding their own identify can be more difficult because of their history; they have already been separated from birth families and placed with someone else. The adolescent can ponder what might have been. Some teens feel that adoption is the cause of all their problems. For others, adoption may not be a major issue.

Whatever the age of the child, educators need to be sensitive to the fact that adoption can raise thoughts, concerns, and questions in a child's mind that may affect their behavior and their academic performance.

How Educators Can Help

There are a number of relatively simple strategies that educators can employ to help adopted children deal with the unique issues of adoption, and to help all students understand that adoption can be a normal and acceptable way to build families.

- It's important that teachers understand and use appropriate, positive language when referring to adoption and related topics. This publication includes both a glossary of common adoption terminology and a listing of appropriate positive adoption language. Using correct terminology and positive adoption language is an important first step in helping provide accurate information to students about adoption.

- Opportunities in daily lessons arise when adoption can be discussed in a positive, matter-of-fact way, reinforcing the idea that adoption is just another way of forming a family. Adoption can be discussed during lessons about multi-cultural, blended, or "different" families; during discussions of genetics or inherited characteristics; or, when literature has adoption or foster care as part of the story.

- Special instructional opportunities focusing on adoption can be developed within the classroom. For example, during November, which is National Adoption Month, a basic lesson about adoption could be taught featuring successful adoptees. An adoptive parent or adult adoptee could be invited to talk to the class, or with permission an adoptive family could be featured.

By approaching adoption as positive and "normal," teachers can be a support and an advocate for adopted children in their classroom.

- Discuss adoption in general terms rather than referring to personal situations. The topic of adoption may arise unexpectedly in the classroom. If it does, the teacher need not be afraid to address it. If the teacher does not know the answer to an adoption

question, they should tell the children they will find the answer and get back to them. Teachers can inform their students that there are endless books and other resources about adoption. (See suggested resources at the end of this publication.)

- Teachers can be a valuable source of assistance and advocacy for an adopted child in the classroom. Occasions may arise when a child is asked a personal question about adoption that the child is unable to deal with, or a child may be teased or taunted about his or her birth or adoptive family. If this happens, teachers are encouraged to step in and assist the child just as they would if they heard inappropriate questions or teasing about issues such as race, culture, or divorce. Even the strongest child may need assistance in these situations. Teachers may seek input from the child's parents about how best to handle individual situations.

Curriculum Concerns

There are many common school assignments which can be challenging and even hurtful to adoptive children because the focus is on a child's background, personal information, genetics, or other topics, which can set the adopted child apart and make him or her feel different than classmates. A number of typical assignments that can be difficult for adopted children are listed below, along with suggestions for educators to broaden the assignments to allow alternatives for all the children in the class as they complete the work. Teachers are encouraged to consider the goals of each assignment and to determine if there are different routes children might be able to take to achieve those goals.

What are the goals of the project?

Can those goals be achieved via different routes?

- **Autobiographies.** Requiring a child to write a complete autobiography can be difficult and emotionally troubling for many adopted children. They may have uncomfortable or traumatic events in their past, which could include removal from their birth home. Or they may have been abused or neglected. Both situations are very personal and difficult to share. In addition, adopted children may not have information about their early years, or there may be gaps in the information they do have. Instead of writing a complete autobiography, a teacher might allow students to choose a few special events in their lives, their life in the past year, a specific time span of three or four years of their own choosing, or a time when they were younger. Or they may be allowed to write a biography of someone they know, or of a historical figure.

- **Baby Pictures.** Many adopted children do not have baby pictures. An alternative assignment could be to allow the children to bring a picture of when they were younger, or to draw a picture of what they thought they looked like as a baby. If the intention is to have the students attempt to match each classmate's name with the correct baby picture, teachers

should be aware that the game might not be much fun for a child adopted from an ethnic or racial background different than the rest of the class, as his or her picture will be immediately identifiable.

- **Family Trees.** The typical family tree assignment can be difficult. It allows room for only one family, forcing the adopted child to choose between birth or adoptive family. Remember, many adopted children have little or no information about their birth families. A child that wants to complete a genetically correct family tree, may be unable to do so. There are many alternatives to overcome these dilemmas and still complete the assignment. Children who have information about both their birth and adoptive families might use rooted trees, diagramming their birth family on the rooted part and the adoptive family on the branches. Rather than using a family tree, a child can be in the center of a "family circle" with the birth family on one side, and the adoptive family on the other side. An older child might want to complete a genogram, which is a diagramming tool for visualizing family relationships. Symbols are used for different genders, and straight lines connect parents to each other and their children. There are various symbols indicating death, divorce, adoption, and other significant circumstances. Households are diagrammed with an elliptical circle surrounding those living in a family unit. Other suggestions are "family houses" rather than trees or "caring trees" where the child places his name on the tree trunk and the names of those who have cared about him (including birth, foster, or adoptive parents, grandparents, and other family members) on the branches. Opportunities to be creative are endless.

- **Study of Genetics or Ethnicity.** Questions, such as "Where did you get your eye color?" or "Who do you most look like in your family?" are personal and may be difficult or impossible for an adopted child to answer. It may be painful for the child to admit that he lives in a family where no one else shares his genetic heritage or ethnicity. Instead of focusing on their own genetic history, students might be allowed to choose any biologically related group—friends, other family members, neighbors—and investigate their inherited characteristics.

- **Mother's Day, Father's Day, Father/Son or Mother/ Daughter Events, and Birthdays.** Special days or events focusing on mothers or fathers often give rise to feelings about birth parents in adopted children. Educators should be aware that some adopted children may still have contact with birth parents, and even if they do not, they may want to remember birth or foster parents on these special occasions by making them a card, a present, or by some other means of acknowledging their importance in the child's life.

  A child's birthday is usually a happy occasion of celebration. However, an adopted child's birthday can often trigger feelings about birth parents and questions about specific facts such as "What time of day was I born?" or "How much did I weigh?" or "Who was there when I was born?"

- **Medical Histories.** It is unusual for an adopted child to have a complete family medical history. Assignments that reveal the absence of such basic information can be painful and difficult for students to accomplish.

- **Student of the Day or Week.** Honoring one student for a day or week and highlighting information about him or her and his or her family is usually intended to be a self-esteem builder. However, it can be uncomfortable for adopted children who may have limited access to pictures and information about their infancy and childhood. Children adopted at an older age may also have very painful memories of their early childhood. It would be helpful if teachers would offer all students a list of many alternatives for the information to be shared, including more non-threatening choices such as hobbies, pets, interests, or sports.

- **Adopt-A-Projects.** Often elementary school classes undertake projects where they "adopt" something, such as a whale, a forest, or a tree, to help children learn to care for the environment. Such projects teach responsibility, but can also cause confusion in the minds of younger children who are concrete thinkers. A child may not understand the difference between the terms "adopting a child" and "adoption" in connection with supporting an animal or inanimate object. Since "adopt-

a" projects usually involve raising money, children could conclude that all you need to do to adopt is pay some money. And since "adopt-a" projects have to be renewed each year, a child may wonder if his or her parents need to pay more money to renew the adoption. If such projects are undertaken, it would be helpful if other words, such as "support" or "aid," were chosen rather than "adopt."

If Questions Arise

Concerns about social, behavioral, or academic difficulties, which might be adoption-related, should be shared with the child's parents. Parents might be able to provide information about the child's background that could help explain the underlying issues. The parents could prompt a solution or an intervention that might benefit the child.

- There are a number of excellent resources on the topic of adoption. The National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC) is probably one of the best sources of information on all aspects of adoption and related issues. NAIC publishes and distributes fact sheets, directories, literature searches, resource lists, bibliographies, and other products. Nearly all of these materials can be accessed online through the NAIC web site at http://www.calib.naic or contact them by phone toll-free at (888) 251-0075. Staff is available from 8:30 a.m to 5:30 p.m. EST Monday through Friday to answer your adoption-related questions.

- The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association employs five Adoption Information Specialists and contracts with 15 Foster and Adoptive Parent Liaisons to provide peer support and answer adoption-related questions. To obtain information on the Liaison that covers your county, please call IFAPA toll-free at (800) 277-8145.

- Listed below is a brief compilation of published materials on adoption that are suitable for different ages and appropriate for school libraries or for use in the classroom. This is just a brief overview of some of the many excellent materials available. More extensive annotated bibliographies are available from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse.

Books for Pre-School Children

Adopted Like Me by Jeffrey LaCure
Adoption by Fred Rogers
Adoption Stories for Young Children by Randall B. Hicks

Beginnings: How Families Come to Be by Virginia Kroll
I Am Adopted by Norma Jean Sass
My Real Family by Emily Arnold McCully
Story of Adoption: Why Do I Look Different by Darla Lowe
Twice Upon a Time: Born and Adopted by Eleanor Patterson

Books for Elementary Students

A Forever Family by Roslyn Banish
Adoption by Judith Greenberg
Adoption Is For Always by Linda Walvood Girard
Being Adopted by Maxine B. Rosenberg
Did My First Mother Love Me? by Kathryn Ann Miller
Families Are Different by Nina Pellegrini
How Babies and Families Are Made by Patricia Schaffer
How I Was Adopted by Joanna Cole
Mario's Big Question: Where Do I Belong? by Carolyn Nystrom
The Mulberry Bird: A Story of Adoption by Ann Braff Brodinsky
Real Sisters by Susan Wright
We Are Family by Sandra D. Lawrence

Books for Junior High Students

Growing Up Adopted by Maxine B. Rosenberg
Molly By Any Other Name by Jean Davies Okimoto
The Long Journey Home by Richard Delaney
The Rainbow People by Laurence Yep
We Don't Look Like Our Parents by Harriet Langsam Sobol
Who is David—A Story of An Adopted Adolescent and His Friends by Evelyn Nerlove

Books for High School Students

The Adoption Reader by Susan Wadia-Ells, Ed.
Adoption: The Facts, Feelings, and Issues of a Double Heritage by Jeanne DuPrau
Coping with Being Adopted by Shari Cohen
Filling in the Blanks: A Guided Look at Growing Up Adopted by Susan Bagel
How It Feels to Be Adopted by Jill Krementz

Perspectives on a Grafted Tree: Thoughts for Those Touched by Adoption by Patricia Irwin Johnson

Why Didn't She Keep Me? Answers to the Question Every Adopted Child Asks by Barbara Burlingham-Brown

Books for Parents and Professionals

Adopting and Advocating for the Special Needs Child: A Guide for Parents and Professionals by L. Anne Babb and Rita Laws

Adopting the Hurt Child: Hope for Families with Special-Needs Kids by Gregory Keck and Regina Kupecky

The Adoption Life Cycle: The Children and Their Families Through the Years by Elinor Rosenberg

Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky

A Child's Journey Through Placement by Vera I. Fahlberg

Our Own: Adopting and Parenting the Older Child by Trish Maskew

Raising Adopted Children: A Manual for Parents by Lois Melina

Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting an Adopted Child by Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb

Talking With Young Children About Adoption by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher

When Friends Ask About Adoption: Question and Answer Guide for Non-Adoptive Parents and Other Caring Adults by Linda Bothun

Positive Adoption Language

The language we choose can be very powerful; words can either hurt or heal. When speaking about an emotion-laden topic such as adoption, it is important to use terms that are respectful and non-judgmental.

In the past, words commonly used to refer to persons or topics involved with adoption sometimes had negative connotations. Listed below are some of the current terms that attempt to convey dignity and respect to the persons involved in adoption and the decisions they make.

Birth parent, birth mother, or birth father are appropriate when referring to the genetic parents of an adopted child. **Biological parent** is also appropriate. These terms are preferable to "real" parent or "natural" parent, which infer that adoptive parents are somehow less real or less natural than those who conceived and gave birth to the child.

Birth child refers to a biological child in a family, and should be used in place of "own" or "real" or "natural" child.

Using labels, such as "unwed mother/father" and "illegitimate" or "unwanted" is discouraged, as these tend to stigmatize and place moral judgments on birth parents and their children.

"Make an adoption plan" or "transfer parental rights" are appropriate, as opposed to "give up," "surrender," "give away," or "adopt out," when referring to a birth parent's decision to place a child for adoption. Placing a child for adoption involves thoughtful decision-making on the part of the birth parents. It is not simply a matter of "giving away" or "surrendering" a child, both of which have negative connotations. Rather, the birth parents (or in some situations, the courts and social workers) have carefully made a plan to transfer the legal rights and responsibilities of parenthood to another party.

In most cases, using the term “adoptive” parent is discouraged. Once the child has been adopted, the new parents are simply the **mother, father, or parents** of the child.

In the past, the term “hard-to-place” child described certain children available for adoption. Today the preferred term is **“special needs.”** This typically refers to a child with a specific physical, medical, mental, or emotional condition, an older child, or siblings who will be placed together.

Glossary of Common Adoption Terminology

The following glossary contains many of the terms commonly used in adoption and may be helpful to you in communicating effectively when discussing adoption-related topics.

Adoptee: A person who joins a family through adoption.

Adoption: A permanent, legally binding arrangement whereby persons other than the birth parents parent a child.

Adoption Plan: The individual plan a particular set of birth parents makes for the adoption of their child.

Adoptive Parent(s): A person or persons who become the permanent parent(s) of a child. They have all the legal rights and responsibilities incumbent upon a birth parent.

Birth Parent(s): The parents who gave birth to a child, made an adoption plan for the child, and subsequently placed the child for adoption.

Closed Adoption: An adoption where there is no contact between the birth parents and the adoptive parents. May also be referred to as a traditional adoption.

Disruption: The situation that occurs when a child leaves the adoptive home prior to the finalization of the adoption. This occurs when (1) the birth parents revoke their consent to the adoption; (2) the adoptive parents choose not to finalize the adoption for reasons of their own; or, (3) the agency disrupts the adoption if the adoptive parents are not complying with post-placement requirements or are endangering the child in any way.

Dissolution: A disruption that occurs after the adoption has been finalized. Birth parents cannot dissolve an adoption, but adoptive parents or the court can.

Foster Care: A temporary arrangement in which persons other than the birth parents care for a child for a period of time. Foster parents do not have the legal rights of birth or adoptive parents.

Foster/Adopt: A form of adoption where a child is placed in a home as a foster child, but is eventually legally adopted by the foster parents who then become adoptive parents.

International Adoption: Any adoption occurring when the child and the adoptive parents are from two different countries.

Kinship Adoption: A form of adoption where the adoptive parents are biologically related to the child, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles, or other relatives.

Open Adoption: An adoption that allows some form of association between the birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents. This can range from picture and letter sharing, to phone calls, to contact through an intermediary, to open contact between the parties themselves.

Private or Independent Adoption: An adoption arranged without the involvement of an agency. Often an adoption attorney is involved.

Private Agency Adoption: An adoption handled by a private, licensed agency. Such agencies are not government sponsored, and must meet state requirements to obtain and maintain a licensed status.

Public Agency Adoption: Adoptions handled by the state's Department of Human Services. The public agency is generally responsible for most older child adoptions and adoptions of children who have been abused, neglected, and/or abandoned by their birth parents.

Special Needs Child: This includes children who have specific physical, medical, mental and/or emotional disorders, an older child, or siblings who must be placed together.

Termination of Parental Rights: A process involving a court hearing whereby a judge enters a decree permanently ending all legal parental rights of a birth parent to a child. This must occur before a child is considered legally free for adoption. Termination of parental rights may be voluntary (the birth parents choose to relinquish their rights and make an adoption plan for their child) or involuntary (the legal rights of birth parents are terminated by the court without their signed consent, typically because of abandonment or repeated or severe abuse or neglect of the child.)

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