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Suggestions for Teachers

Working With Adopted Children

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Language and Trigger Words

Words not only convey facts, they also evoke feelings.

When outsiders to the experience of adoption use words that seem to place meaning or be biased regarding adoption then those who have first hand experience sometimes take offense or feel uncertain as to whether or not that outsider is an ally to them. We have provided some words that people use in the context of adoption with some suggestions and feedback about their meaning.

Triad: Members of the adoption triad are the three groups that are most personally impacted by the experience, the adopted person, birth parents (parents who give birth and then place their children for adoption) and adoptive parents (parents who become the legal parent to a child who is not born to them).

Like all sensitive subjects or sensitized groups, different people have different responsiveness to various language choices. Generally we suggest letting adopted children (and their siblings) explore their feelings openly, which is usually best accomplished by encouraging them to use whatever language they chose and minimizing corrections which may in turn make them feel they don't have full support to talk openly.

Least triggering language	Most triggering language
Birthparent	Real parent
Biological parent	Natural parent
Parent	Adoptive parent
Birth child	Own child or Real child
Adopted child	Not really yours
Born to unmarried parents	Illegitimate
Terminate parental rights	Give up
Make an adoption plan	Give away; Put up for adoption
To parent	To keep
Search	Track down parents
Child placed for adoption	An unwanted child
Child with special needs	Handicapped child
Was adopted	Is adopted

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Adopt-A Confusion

Adapted from: *Adopt-a Confusion* by Patricia Irwin Johnston, www.perspectivespress.com

The problem lies in the misuse of the word adoption. The adopt-a projects, with their gimmicky "adoption certificates" and "adoptive parent" labels, trade on the primary definition of adoption, which relates to family planning and family building, creating a striking mental image that packs a marketing wallop.

Adoption is confusing enough an issue for young children without adding to the confusion through commercial projects.

Using adoption to catch attention, touch heartstrings and raise big bucks exploits children who were adopted and those waiting for permanency.

- Did I cost money to adopt?
- Do you have to keep paying to keep me adopted?
- Can other people adopt me if they sign up?
- Can you return me if I'm not "good enough"?

The way to prevent these confusions is really quite simple. Adoption is a process by which families are planned and formed. To trivialize it in a commercial way insults the birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees who have been personally touched by this process.

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Support Adopted Children by Letting Them Decide What to Share - - - WISE Up

Walk Away

It's Private

Share Something

Educate Others

Up

Kids Must Develop Their Own Strategies for Answering Questions From Strangers & Friends.

Sometimes adopted children have difficult beginings -- that is why they are placed for adoption. It's OK for them to just not feel like answering questions all the time. Getting away from those who probe, tease or are over curious is sometimes appropriate.

Kids need to know it is OK for them not to tell the whole truth all the time. They do not owe anyone their personal story — curious outsiders, most especially.

When they wamt someone to understand them better they often have to tell them how they feel or what their experiences of adoption are. Don't make assumptions. Listen rather than tell. Empower children to know their own experience best.

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Adoption Myths

Can you respond to the following inaccuracies with confidence? All these myths are common perceptions you are likely to hear and so will the kids in your classroom. Help correct public knowledge for the sake of your kids!

Kids born here (in the US) who are available for adoption are always either drug exposed or HIV positive. Many healthy newborns are available for adoption because their birth parents are facing life circumstances that make them believe that their child would be better off with an adoptive family than with them. Drug addiction and serious health problems are an issue in a minority of placement decisions.

Those Chinese girls [or Romanian, or Russian or . . .] always have attachment issues. Children born in orphanages have common, normal responses to group care that may increase the time or effort it take for them to connect to their adoptive parents but the large majority of those children placed under the age of three successfully attach to their adoptive families.

Now that you've adopted a baby, you are sure to get pregnant. Or*, I guess you shoot blanks or have a barren coop.* Although many of us have met someone who has gotten pregnant unexpectedly after adopting a child, it is a statistically rare event. There are many reasons people choose to adopt, only one of which is infertility. Others include the desire to help a child who might not otherwise have a family, the decision to become a single parent, the desire to have a child without bringing another child into the world when so many are already here and in need of a family and many more…

Kids who know their birth parents are always confused. Children's confusion usually originates from confused adults in their lives. Kids whose parents (birth or adoptive) are clear about their roles and relationships are rarely confused. Open adoption is a form of adoption where the birth and adoptive parents have direct contact and eventually the child has direct contact with birth family members. It does not mean that they confuse their roles. Like a cake: the birth parents provide the ingredients, the adoptive parents provide the preparation and tools.

If a child has a good enough adoptive parent that child won't have any adoption issues. Adoption is relationship, a lifetime journey that is not without issues. No adoptive parent or child will be without particular sensitivities that are normal under the circumstances of adoption. It is not a parent's role to erase difficult emotions, but to help, support and lead their children as they face and go through them.

Adopted children always seek out their real family eventually — especially if they are unhappy with their adoptive family. Adopted children have two real families: their birth family and their adoptive family. It is natural for children to want to know about their genetic heritage. Their desire is not related to how well they have been parented. If anything it may be the happier, better-adjusted adopted child who feels confident and strong enough to consider searching for his or her birth parents.

How much does an adopted baby cost? Human beings cannot and should not have a price. It is illegal to buy a baby. Reputable professionals provide adoptive parents with the services needed to adopt successfully. Like all professionals they are paid for their services, but no adopted child has been bought or sold.

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Non-Adoptee Privilege

by Kelly Reineke

I thought I was pretty well aware of my privilege as a white American; I long ago became sensitive to and have tried to remain conscious of the issues listed in Peggy McIntosh's well-known essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Backpack."* However, until I became an adoptive parent, I was unaware of the privilege associated with my non-adoptee status. Listening to adoptees give visceral examples of what they are up against that I am not, I began to wonder if a list similar to McIntosh's existed for non-adoptee privilege.

I wanted to know: What are the benefits I receive just by my non-adoptee status? What challenges and disrespectful treatment do many adoptees face day-to-day that I do not? Without this awareness, how can I have empathy for what adoptees are dealing with? How can I be an ally? How can I find tools that will equip and empower my daughter? Taking this further, because privilege is often invisible to those of us who have it, yet visible in neon to those who do not, what am I saying and doing (or not saying and doing) that is disrespectful and ineffective in my relationships with adoptees—especially my daughter? This article is my attempt to begin to answer these questions.

While I know that I can never fully understand what it is like to be an adoptee, I discovered that reflecting on my non-adoptee privilege can help me become a more empathic, respectful and effective parent, friend, and human being. Most encouraging, after sharing what I've learned so far with my daughter and her friend (another adoptee), I've seen the potential for developing more tools that can empower adoptees, especially tweens and teens, to deal with unwelcome questions, comments and slights—building on and enhancing the WISE UP method (Walk away, say It's private, Share something, or Educate).**

Below is a partial list of my non-adoptee privileges. My list draws on several sources: two previous lists written by adoptive parents, and a list prepared on the listserve International-Adopt¬-Talk (IAT).*** The latter was compiled from contributions of adoptive parents and adoptees and as one IAT member described it, "is meant to be a starting point for personal reflections on how [most] non-adoptees benefit in their daily lives by having been raised in their biological families and some of the losses, prejudice and challenges faced by adoptees."

I have tried to focus here on those aspects of non-adoptee privilege that have been harder for me personally to see than those related to race, class, or culture. I am deeply grateful to the friends, family members, and members of the adoption community who have helped me think about this. I have not footnoted every source here, but am happy to share background material with any reader interested in exploring these issues in greater depth.

As a non-adoptee: I have access to information (related to my birth and early history) and people (my biological family), that for many adoptees is limited or denied.

- I can get copies of my birth certificate without the key information withheld or blacked out (in my presence!) by the state or agency.
- I don't have to wonder about the date, time, and place of my birth.
- I know my story; I am not tortured by unknowns (is my birth family alive or dead, do I have siblings, did I join my family in an ethical/legal way?).
- I am not constantly "on alert" that new information or people might be dropped on me, adding stress to my mind/body. As Bryan Thao Worra has written, "For transcultural adoptees, our lives are written in pencil… Everything you think you know about yourself can change in an instant." ****
- I can easily answer questions about my birth. I can get my chart done.
- I know my family's medical history and can easily fill out forms that request it. I don't have to wonder what health issues may run in my family.
- I don't have to wonder about what the family I was born into looked like, what I looked like as a baby and toddler, what I'll probably look like as an adult, and who I look and act like.
- I do not live with the pain that I may leave this planet without knowing one person who is genetically related to me, without seeing my resemblance or mannerisms in another human being.

While growing up I could:

- answer questions about how tall I'd probably get, where I got my physical traits, who I look like.
- complete school assignments without pain: tell the story of my name, the story of my birth, draw a family tree, bring in baby photos, etc.

* McIntosh, P. (1992). White Privilege, Male Privilege. In M. Anderson & P. H. Collins (Eds.), Race, Class, and Gender.

** Schoettle, Marilyn, The W.I.S.E. UP Powerbook.

*** "Doing Some Unpacking" by Heather S. at http://www.productionnotreproduction.com/2007/09/doing-some-unpacking.html; and "White and Biological Privilege in Children and How it Affects Our Internationally Adopted Children" by Marsha Roberts at www.informedadoptions.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=31. IAT is a Yahoo group for members of the international adoption triad; I have found it an invaluable resource.

**** As quoted by Jae Ran Kim during her illuminating talk on ambiguous loss and adoption at Pact Family Camp, Summer 2008.

I do not share the same level of narrative burden, (as described within the adoption context by Dr. Robert Ballard), as adoptees.**

- I'm not regularly placed in situations where I have to decide whether or not to tell people how I joined my family, to people who may feel I'm obligated to explain who I am.
- When people learn of my non-adoptee status, I am not pitied and/or do not get asked an exhausting array of questions adoptees face including:
    - o Have you met your parents?
    - o How does it feel to be adopted?
    - o What happened?
- I am not "pushed" (verbally and non-verbally) to tell the story of my birth and child hood history to people who feel entitled to have their questions answered.

I can usually assume:

- I'm in the company of other non-adoptees.
- other family members see me as a rightful member, one of their own.
- I'll see my resemblance in my family, others will comment on it, and I'll be affirmed for it.
- when I'm experiencing strong emotions, struggling in relationships, or don't know why I'm "off," I don't have to wonder if this is related to my non-adoptee status.
- people will not attribute my emotions and behavior, especially as a child/teen, to my non-adoptee status.
- people will not have negative/low expectations about my behavior or potential based on my non-adoptee status.
- people won't make negative comments about the mother that gave birth to me.
- people won't praise or condemn how I entered my family based on moral or political grounds.
- people will not tell me how I ended up being part of my family and how I should feel about the experience.
- people will not ask my parents how much I cost. I am not expected by some people to:
- have certain positions on adoption and abortion.
- speak for all non-adoptees.
- reassure future adoptive parents.
- speak only positively about adoption.

For me, the worst part of the invisibility of non-adoptee privilege is that when some adoptees have tried to make the issues above visible, they have been labeled as "angry adoptees" or told "you should be grateful….you could have been aborted…. you could have been left to languish in an orphanage."

When I shared these reflections with my eleven-year-old daughter, an Indian adoptee, and her friend, a Russian adoptee, what really resonated for them is that one of the toughest things about being an adoptee is repeatedly having to decide if and when to disclose their adoptee status, and, if they do, all the questions, comments and "pushing" for the story they experience. Three personal examples from the past year:

At an orientation for a summer day camp for multi-heritage andtransracially adopted kids: I was talking with some parents while across the room a counselor spoke with my daughter. Then the director gave a talk about how the camp would be a safe space—no-one putting labels on you, asking annoying questions about who you are, etc. Afterwards in the car my daughter was angry. She told me the counselor had said to her "So, your dad is Indian." (I later learned the new counselor had an Indian father and white mother.) "When I said 'no' she looked all confused. She just kept staring at me so I had to say, 'no, I'm adopted.'"

While I was cleaning up after a school event (without my daughter): A parent I hadn't met before began asking questions. Her level of frustration kept going up when my responses to her questions (using the WISE UP approach) didn't give her what she wanted (the adoption story). For me, the energy was intense: her tone, facial expressions, the way she shifted her body into my personal space. I thought, "I'm an adult, a nonadoptee, and this parent is a peer...think about how this must feel for my daughter when there are also differences in power and status."

My daughter's conversation with a teacher during a visit to a middle school: After the visit, my daughter was angry. She described the meeting with the teacher, "She looked at my name and said, 'Oh, so one of your parents is Indian.' I said 'no.' She looked confused, then she said, 'So both of your parents are Indian.' And I said 'no.' Then she just stared at me. So I had to say, 'I'm adopted.' And then she smiled and said, 'Oh, that's great. I adopted my children.'"

The girls shared many more examples, and their feelings of frustration, sadness, anger and exhaustion. When I shared some of the adult adoptee stories in Ballard's study, they appreciated learning they were not alone. I told them that what Ballard found was that many adult adoptees perceived this as a narrative burden. It got quiet. All these different experiences had a name. They both nodded their heads: it seemed to be validating for them.

I am trying to be more respectful of privacy—especially as a non-adoptee. After my experience at the school, I remembered a time that I regretted asking a question that offended someone. Since then, I've been trying to "sit" more with my not knowing, versus asking questions (even when my intentions are good and I'm trying to connect). I am trying to wait and let others decide if and when to share with me.

I hope to increase my awareness of my non-adoptee privilege so that I can be a more empathic, respectful and effective adoptive parent, friend, and ally. This is a daily, lifelong practice—I know I will keep making mistakes, but hope to learn from them. I also hope to work with others to develop more tools to empower transracially and internationally adopted tweens and teens (building on WISE UP and the wealth of material adoptees have produced, ranging from academic articles to films to blog posts). Finally, I hope my efforts lead to more conversations with the many well-intentioned, caring people in my daughter's life (teachers, coaches, counselors, friends, extended family members) so that they can become even better allies to our family.

***** *Ballard, R. L. (2006). Identity Formation in Vietnamese Adoptees of Operation Babylift: An Exploratory Study in Intercultural Communication. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Palm Springs, CA.*

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Understanding Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents are different. They can feel like a targeted group, because people often single them or their children out. If you want to be known as an adoption friendly teacher, understand that the world that treats them as second best families.

Respectful discussion with parents.
Ask them how they approach issues first.

Good communication with parents.
Talk beforehand about plans for curriculum related to family and difference.

This is personal for those living it.
Don't set yourself up as the expert particularly if you have no personal experience.

Racism
A belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities. A belief that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.

Sexism
A prejudice or discrimination against someone on the basis of gender.

Adoptism
A belief that forming a family by birth is superior to forming a family by adoption.

A belief that keeping a child with his/her biological parents is inherently better than placing a child for adoption.

A belief that growing up as an adopted person is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities.

A belief that differences in family-building structures or methods produce an inherent superiority in families of a particular structure or method.

Prejudice or discrimination against members of the adoption triad.

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How I Explained Adoption

by Amy Klatzkin

Early in first grade at my daughter's school, each child is given a special day when she gets to help the teacher in prominent ways and make important choices (like who gets to stand first in line). Classmates interview the child of the day, and the teacher records the answers on a big poster. My daughter was the first of two adopted children in her class to have a special day, and inevitably questions about adoption came up— although, the teacher reported, they were afterthoughts. The class had just finished interviewing my daughter, and the teacher was about to move on, when a classmate asked, "Weren't you adopted?"

I got a message from the teacher that afternoon saying that adoption had come up and that my daughter had handled the situation with confidence and pride. The teacher then read to the class a book called *Families Are Different*. In it a girl adopted transracially from Korea talks about her white parents, her Korean sister, and the occasional discomfort of being different from other families. But she looks around the neighborhood and notices that while in some families everyone looks alike (even the dog), in others there are many differences. All families, she concludes, are held together "by a special kind of glue called love."

I was glad the teacher had read the book, and I was gratified to hear that my daughter had enjoyed her special day. So I was surprised, when I picked up my daughter that afternoon, to see her looking sad. It turns out that the interview was fine. She had enjoyed talking about herself and didn't mind the questions about adoption. She loved the book and was pleased that her teacher had read it aloud. But there was still a problem.

One child had asked if the two adopted girls in *Families Are Different* were real sisters. And the teacher had answered, "They're kind of sisters." It's possible that no one except my daughter picked up on the subtext of that answer. But some kids catch all the nuances when grownups talk about adoption. Mine has her radar fine-tuned. She heard that the teacher wasn't sure just how "real" those sisters were. My daughter doesn't have a sibling, but she has adopted friends who do. Weren't Betty and Zoe real sisters, she asked?

I explained that sometimes grownups not in adoptive families aren't always good at answering questions about adoption. What's confusing, I explained, is that before Zoe was adopted, she and Betty weren't sisters, but that from the moment of adoption on, they were sisters forever. And by the way, would she like me to come talk to the class about adoption next week?

ADOPTING EMMA

At the beginning of the school year, I'd given my daughter's teacher a packet of materials on adoption and school issues (see box). The teacher had invited me to give a talk on adoption, but I hadn't scheduled it yet. I wished I'd done it before my daughter's special day, but after would have to do.

I was nervous about talking to the class, so I asked several parents who'd done it before for some suggestions. Then I talked with my daughter. She had a terrific idea. She has a doll named Emma who was made to look like her when she was one year old. "Let's dress Emma in my orphanage clothes," she said, "and we can talk about Emma's adoption."

And that's what we did. The class loved it, and everyone wanted to hold the "baby." My daughter was a participant in the discussion rather than the subject of it, which really pleased her. We talked first about different types of families, how some look alike and some don't. In my daughter's school a third of the children are biracial so it's not just transracial adoptees who look different from one or both parents. We used this realization as a springboard to discussing adoption.

Together we made two lists on the black board. On one side the children named things that babies need: diapers, bottles, food, clothes, hugs, love, and so on. On the other side they listed what parents do: feed, clothe, and hold babies, change diapers, give medicine. None of the firstgraders said anything about being born. At the top of the parents' list I added a crucial part of every child's story: babies need parents to bring them into the world.

You have to be careful how you talk about birth with first-graders. At this age there's a wide range of knowledge about procreation. Some six-year-olds can give accurate anatomical names to all the relevant body parts, while others know only that a baby grows in a mother's tummy. One boy in the class insisted that babies come from the earth. While some of his classmates shouted corrections, I redirected the discussion. I wasn't there to teach the birds and the bees.

A JOB FOR EMMA'S FOREVER PARENTS

Once we had our lists of what babies need and what parents do, I moved on to adoption. I told them to remember that adoption happens for grownup reasons and that the need for adoption is never, ever a child's fault. Birth parents sometimes have big problems (like being too young to be parents or, in some parts of the world, being afraid to break rules about how many children they can have). Because of a big grownup problem, some birth parents decide that they can't be "forever parents" to their child. I put a circle around "bring babies into the world." I picked up Emma, the doll, and said, "Emma's birth parents could bring her into the world, but they didn't think they could do all these other things," and I pointed to the long list of things babies need and parents do.

"Emma's forever parents," I explained, "adopted her because they wanted to do all those other things for her. But they didn't do the first thing: they didn't bring her into the world. So Emma has two sets of real parents: her birth parents, who are certainly real even if we don't know who they are, and her forever parents, who are also real and who are part of her real forever family."

I don't know if it was the doll or the lists, but for most of the kids something clicked. They were excited to understand something concrete about adoption, and my daughter was proud of the whole thing—especially the interest everyone took in Emma's clothes. "Those were really my clothes," she confided to the class, to general acclaim. When the other adopted child in the class had her special day, no one asked about adoption. They knew enough for now.

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Developmental Stages of Understanding Adoption

Babies to 2-year-olds

A baby's primary task is to develop a sense of trust in the world and come to view it as a place that is predictable and reliable. Infants accomplish this task through attachment to their caretakers. When children learn to separate from their parents be crawling and then by walking, a milestone is reached, and babies may temporarily become fearful of separation. Psychological separation begins: babies express their own wishes and opinions.

Toddlers are faced with an internal conflict between wishing for autonomy and anxiety about separating from the primary caregiver. During this stage, when you must guide and protect your child, you become the embodiment of "no." Not surprisingly, your child becomes frustrated, demonstrating this frustration in behavior ranging from crying to throwing, hitting, biting, pinching and temper tantrums. For adoptive parents, who sometimes worry that this frustrated behavior has something to do with the child being adopted, it helps to know that this kind of behavior is typical of toddlers. Children who are adopted sometime after infancy usually follow the same attachment and separation paths as other children, but possibly in a different time sequence.

Children who have had the "normal" experience of attachment interupted by foster and adoptive placement of naturally going to have to their developmental timeline of attachement altered. This often means that children with multiple placements or challenged attachment will regress (AND IT IS HEALTHY FOR THEM TO DO SO) in order to repeat the steps of attachement and eventually develop confidence about separation. Do not expect these children to follow the typical timeline of children who have not had similar separations or challenges.

Preschool: Age 3 to 5

Preschoolers are very concrete thinkers. They are just beginning to learn about things like "same and different" and are beginning to apply that new idea to everything, including friends and family. For this age group, the idea of "difference" doesn't bring with it the uncomfortable feelings that it can evoke in older kids. When a child learns that another child was adopted by his or her parents it is just another brand new piece of information for them. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to introduce preschoolers to the full range of family structures in a fun and constructive way. Being careful to use respectful adoption language ("birth" parents rather than "natural" or "real" parents, for example) and set the stage for these kids to view adoption – their own or their classmate's – in a positive way.

- Be concrete and simple.
- Use props, such as dolls, simple drawings and story books to mention adoption as as just another form of family.
- Stay relaxed and matter of fact.
- Your tone of voice is more important than the words.
- Don't worry if they reject accurate explanations, especially about being born to someone else--it is normal for children to explore feelings through fantasy.
- Keep in mind that children usually feel good about being adopted at this age but will still have confusions.

LEARN THE BASIC VOCABULARY OF ADOPTION SO THAT YOU CAN HELP CHILDREN AND PARENTS.

Elementary Years: Age 6 to 9

Kids this age see themselves in terms of what they can do, and begin to compare themselves to their peers. They do not like to be different, unless that difference is along the lines of "I can read better than anyone in my class" or "I can run faster than most of my friends." Since this is the age that teasing begins, having differences in their family structure pointed out can make elementary school kids very uncomfortable. Even when it is clear that their teacher is being supportive in talking about adoption, they may not want to contribute to or participate in the discussion. And school assignments that set them up as different than all the other children in their class can provoke real emotional conflicts.

This is also the age when they begin to understand the full picture of adoption. "If I was adopted into this family, I must have left another family behind." They use their developing conceptual skills to try to figure out how and why it all happened. They may become absorbed in the struggle to understand, and might appear unfocused or distracted at school. If they are struggling with painful feelings of loss or rejection, they may act those feelings out.

- Respect adopted children's privacy in public.Notice and help kids with adoption-related teasing as with all teasing.Help kids deflect intrusive questions if they do not want to talk about it. Be proactive on their behalf.
- Mention adoption and adoptive families regularly. Questions may or may not follow.
- Children of this age are self-conscious about being different. Do not put them on the spot.
- Some children may volunteer to share about adoption and their story. Be casually encouraging.
- Support the idea that there are many kinds of families, including adoptive families.

Middle School & High School

Tweens are beginning the zig-zag to independence so identity issues are very important to them. They want to be in control of how they appear to their peers and the world in general, so being "outed" as adopted can cause problems for them. Indirect help from their teachers in normalizing their family can be powerful. Bringing up adoption as part of a class lesson or discussion about family formation is important. They are also more likely to look for support outside of their family, leaning on a trusted teacher to test out their new views, or talk about what's on their minds. Give them the support they need while gently encouraging them to explore adoption-related questions with those who understand their experience.

The adolescent's primary task is to establish a secure sense of identity. Being able to live and work on one's own, to maintain a comfortable position in one's family, and to become a contributing citizen in one's community are the goals. If normal adolescence involves a crisis in identity, it stands to reason that adopted teenagers will face additional complications. Adolescents often express their reactions to loss by rebelling against parental standards. Knowing that they have a different origin contributes to their need to define themselves autonomously. Teens typically think and wonder about their birth parents.

- Model the use of current adoption language. Your students may or may not use it. Avoid putting a child on the spot about being adopted or being knowledgeable about it.
- Mention adoption and adoptive families as part of your teaching as appropriate.
- If students bring up adoption concerns, provide facts, and encourage parental involvement.

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Adoption Sensitive Assignments

An assignment loses its value if it hurts a single child.

Children who don't see their lives reflected in their assignments and by their teachers often react either by getting mad or just shutting down, because underneath they feel hurt or sad that they are not recognized or afraid they it is their fault and they are not "OK," because they don't fit the "norm" being described by the assignment.

Most assignments can be modified to allow everyone to feel included and still reap the benefits and underlying intention of the exercise.

Usually simply offering examples that give the children options and choices will ensure that children and families from all kinds of backgrounds and histories can find at least one option that validates their own situation and gives them choices about what kind of personal information they will share.

Few people understand children as well as teachers. Not only do teachers spend all day, every working day in the company of children, but their position requires that they understand both child development and those talents, idiosyncracies, and characteristics that make each of their students unique.

In a classroom, a child studies more than reading and math; she learns how the worlds operates beyond her own home. If he is lucky he is taught to search for commonality and to appreciate difference in his classmates and then in the people of the wider community.

Teachers are guides, leading students from small to large, from the known to the unknown, from ignorance to wisdom, from the past to the future.

To a young child the teacher is the world, the embodiment of knowledge. Awestruck, the first grader corrects his mother with, "But teacher says ..."

Today's teachers stand before classes far more complex than those of their counterparts a generation ago. Dramatic social changes call teachers to play the roles of therapists, social workers, parent's advocates, and police officers.

The adopted child weathers the same societal storms as her peers. In elementary school, where not so long ago braid pulling was an issue, she must grapple with AIDS, drugs, divorce and violence. And she must come to some understanding of the great WHY. "Why did the mother who gave birth to me not raise me as her own?"

Teachers, of course, cannot be all things to all of their students. With commendable diligence, teachers help children gain the confidence to live in and attempt to change a troubled world. A teacher's belief waters a child's growing self esteem. A teacher's acceptance enables a child to feel at home in the world.

The adopted child knows he belongs when the reality of his life is reflected in the culture of the classroom. He is at home when he hears positive adoption language as part of everyday class discussions, when his family is validated as real in the lessons and literature of his school.

When a child whose family is touched by adoption sees pictures of non-traditional families on the walls of his classroom and in the books of the library, she feels connected to the educational setting. When assignments are bradened pruposefully to be inclusinve and respectful of many diverse family models, the child can relax.

When parents add their expertise, their adoption savvy, their cultures, their advocacy, and their support to the school educations in enriched. When students understand the difference between respecful privacy and fearful secrecy and when that distinction is honored by adults, children feel safe, secure enough to belive they "can do it."

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Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Environments

Family Diversity Curriculum

Discuss adoptive and foster families in the context of many different family sturctures. This offers an opportunity to also talke about other family issues like single parenting, LGBTQ families, divorce, etc. Incorporate adopted people and adoptive families into the classroom and curriculum.

Suggestions:

1. Incorporate a targeted unit of family structure.
2. Consider showing and using the "That's A Family" movie and classroom curriculum.
3. Have children draw and write about their families in class.
4. Have representational materials in the classroom, posters, books, etc.
5. Include adoptive families in storytelling, imaginary play, etc.
6. Include adoptive families in classroom examples like math word problems, etc.
7. Use alternative suggestions for family tree, name, baby photo, Mother's Day, Father's Day and birth day curriculum. (see Pact teacher suggestions)
8. Consider celebrating "Family Day" as a way of validating all different kinds of families.
9. Encourage the school library to purchase adoption themed books and display prominantly as a collection.

Student/Family Interactions

Helping a child know that the teachers and school staff understand his or her family adds to a feeling of safetey at a school. This also models language and attitudes for other students, helping to create an understanding that all different family structures are "nomal" and "OK."

Suggestions:

1. Understand each child's family structure.
2. Learn what children call each parent/caregiver or guardian as well as birth family members and use that language with the child and when referring to their family.
3. Consult the parents and/or child to see if they are open to teaching how families talk about their family, including how it was formed and who is part of their family.
4. Never "out" a student as being adopted (or fostered) unless they or their parents come out themselves.
5. Consider having adoptive and foster family affinity groups, perhaps a potluck so families can get to know one another within the community and decide on their own agenda and or concerns within the larger school community.

School and District Policy

Institutional help set the context for inclusion, both at the school and district level.

Suggestions:

1. Make school fors that are inclusive of all kinds of caregives and are not gender specific, so that there is not distinction between "kinds" of parents or guardians.
2. Send letters home to families rather that "mother & father" or "parents."
3. Have in place a robust anti-bias, anti-bullying policy that includes plans and policy for addressing specific problems as they arise.
4. Fund trainings for teachers and staff about how to support adopted and foster children & their families.

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Problematic Assignments

Baby Pictures - Timelines

Assignment:
1. Bring in your baby picture so everyone can guess who is who.
2. Create a personal life timeline for yourself starting with your birth until now and showing important dates and events in your life.

Problems/Feelings for Adopted & Foster Children:
Adopted and foster children sometimes do not have any pictures of themselves as newborns or infants and sometimes not even as toddlers. Children find it embarrassing if they are the only one to bring in a picture of themselves at age four when all the other kids have newborn or hospital photos. They may feel forced to publicly "explain" soemthing they aren't ready to discuss with their classmates.

Alternatives:
1. Ask kids to bring in pictures from "when they were younger" that they like or were taken on a day that was important to them. This gives them an opportunity to share what they choose and they can bring in something relatively recent, if that is all they have, without feeling like they can't do what the teacher asked..
2. Invite kids to create a "significant events in my life" timeline for themselves showing or describing 5 or 10 events. This way they can choose events that may or may not have anything to do with when they entered their family. Give examples like: "I learned to walk" or "I got a bicycle" or "I started school."

Birthdays and Adoption Day

Assignment:
Celebrations or rituals on children's birthdays. Sometimes adoptive parents ask to have the class celebrate their child's "adoption day" (the day the child joined the family.).

Problems/Feelings for Adopted & Foster Children:
These are meant to be a positive celebration of the child themselves, but some adopted children may not know a lot of details about their birth, including the time place and sometimes even the date. They also may have feelings that surface about their own adoption that they are still working through and thus are not ready to share in a classroom setting.

Alternatives:
These celebrations are important and while we don't suggest they be avoided we do urge teachers to work carefully with parents to understand if there are any sensitivities about these issues for any of the kids their particular class so the celebrations and rituals can be tailored to avoid pointing our any difficulties or painful truths that any one child might prefer to avoid. For instance, if you have a child who does not know their birthday, see if they know what month they were born in and create the celebration rituals for that class around the month of the children's births. Or if one adopted child wants to have a ritual on their adoption day with their classmates, let the other adoptive/foster parents know what you are planning and when so they can be forewarned and decide for themselves if their own child will benefit from participation or would find such a celebration personally difficult.

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Problematic Assignments

Mother's Day/ Father's Day

Assignment:
1. Make something to give to your mother or father for the holiday.
2. Draw a picture or write something about your mother or father.

Problems/Feelings for Adopted & Foster Children:
For kids that have more than one mother or father, this can bring up questions that they may or may not want to ask in the classroom setting about who they should do this for. If they do not have a mother or father living in their household or that they see regularly this can feel embarrassing.

Alternatives:
1. Make something to give to your mother or father or grandma/grandpa or aunt/uncle or someone who is important to you or takes care of you.
2. Draw a picture or write something about someone in your life who has made a difference or taught you something.

Names

Assignment:
Introduce yourself and explain how you got your name and what it's meaning is.

Problems/Feelings for Adopted & Foster Children:
Adopted and foster children usually are given different names by their birth parents and adoptive parents. They may know those names but might feel awkward if they are forced to tell the story of their names to a brand new set of people.

Alternative:
Ask kids to share their name and tell each other one thing they like or don't like about their name — this could include the history of how and why they got it but also some alternatives like how people pronounce it or the nicknam associated with it.

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Problematic Assignments

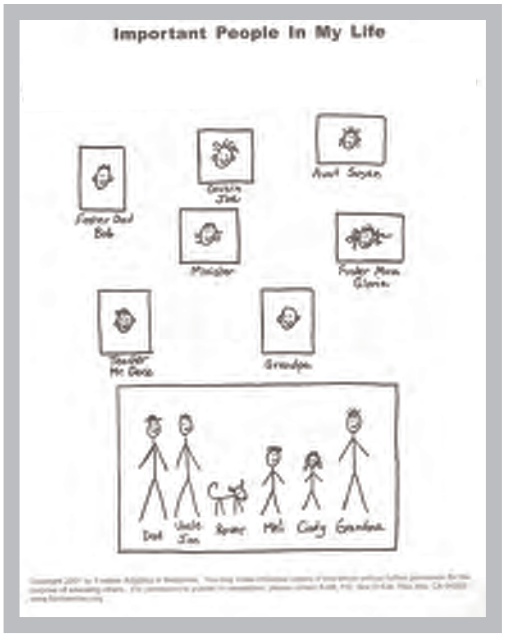
Family Tree Assignments

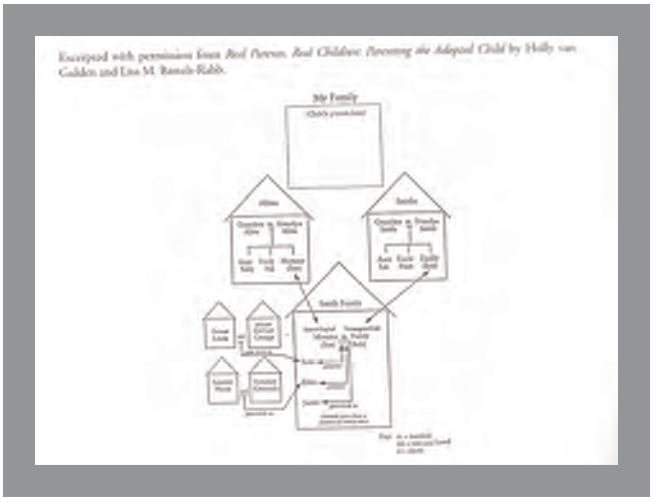
Assignment:
1. Create your family tree (often associated with a fill in the blank model assigning specific people like one mother, one father etc.)

Problems/Feelings for Adopted & Foster Children:
This assignment can be problematic not only for adoptive and foster families but also for single parent families, gay or lesbian households and guardianship/kinship care households.

Alternatives:
There are many alternatives that teachers can consider:
1. Draw a picture of the people in your life who love you and you consider family.
2. Draw a picture of who lives in your home and what their relationship to you is.
3. Create your loving tree or caring tree and tell something about each person that does something important for you or teaches you something.
4. Create a kinship tree or genogram that shows people who you are related to genetically as well as those who are part of your family because you live with them or because you care about or take care of each other.

Examples





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Resources & Referrals

Ask yourself...

Do I know what is normal under the circumstances of adoption?

If you have a child in your class whose parent has just died or who just moved to a new home, you expect to see emotional reactions that may spill over into the classroom and school work of that child. You understand that for a little while his or her behavior is *normal under that child's circumstances.*

If you have an adopted child who you feel might be having issues that seem beyond the norm, talk to the parents of the child about reaching out to get some help from experts who have experience working with adopted kids. Remember, kids who are adopted come from all different kinds of circumstances and previous life experiences. Some behaviors and feelings that may look out of the norm to you might be normal under that particular child's circumstances. Even professionals with the best of intentions and expertise in their own field don't necessarily know what is normal for adopted children.

Websites

Adoption Information Clearinghouse
www.naic.acf.hhs.gov

Child Welfare League of America
www.cwla.org

DaveThomas Foundation for Adoption
www.davethomasfoundationforadoption.org

Evan B. Donaldson
www.adoptioninstitute.org

Perspectives Press
www.perspectivespress.com

Bay Area Adoption Referrals

Pact, An Adoption Alliance
510.243.9460
www.pactadopt.org

Children's Hospital Oakland Adoption Clinic
510.428.3010
www.childrenshospitaloakland.org/cs/inter_adoption.html

Bay Area Attachment Center
510.287.8981
bayattach@aol.com

Families Adopting in Response
(FAIR)
www.fairfamilies.org

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Using Books

There are many wonderful books available which talk about adoption or feature adopted characters. Understanding characters in books is one of the first ways a child has of making sense of the world. We all come to know more clearly who we are while reaching out imaginatively, for who or what we might become.

Stories help kids know they are not alone. When young children are experiencing difficulties in their daily life, reading about other children with similar problems can help them see hope for their situation. When children read about others in similar situations, they come to realize they are not the only ones with those fears and concerns.

Become an activist about being sure there is a balance of books about people of color and adoption in your school and your library whether there are adopted children in your classroom or not. Books depicting human experiences are valuable for all children — and perhaps even more so for children who are not exposed to people different from themselves on a daily basis. If they don't have chances to develop understanding and tolerance they will likely grow up most comfortable with the status quo — which unfortunately, in our society, still includes too many isms, including adoptism.

All children need mirrors which provide reflections of themselves. All children need windows which provide kids with opportunities to understand and identify with others who are different from themselves. Choose books that offer both mirrors and windows to your child's world and beyond.

There are many ways to be adopted, not just one. Understanding differences helps kids better understand their own journey. Favorite books are a way to reinforce that adoption is a normal part of your existence and allows new questions to come up.

For age appropriate book suggestions contact Pact or check out our bookstore online at www.pactadopt.org 510.243.9460

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Famous Adopted People

Mark Acre - athlete
Edward Albee - playwright
Alexander the Great - 356-323 B.C.
Aristotle - philosopher
John J. Audubon - naturalist
Freddie Bartholomew - actor
Shari Belafonte-Harper - actress
Ingrid Bergman - actress
Andy Berlin - entrepreneur
Halle Berry - actress
Surya Bonaly - figure skater
Les Brown - motivational speaker
Richard Burton - actor
Sen. Robert Byrd - politician
Peter and Kitty Carruthers - figure skaters
George Washington Carver - inventor
President William Clinton - politician
Lynnette Cole - Miss USA 2000
Nat King Cole - singer
Christina Crawford - author
Crazy Horse - Lakota war chief
Daunte Culpepper - football player
Faith Daniels - news anchor
Tommy Davidson - comedian
Charles Dickens - writer
Eric Dickerson - athlete
Bo Diddley - musician, performer
Carl Theodor Dreyer - film director
Larry Ellison - entrepreneur: head of Oracle
Clarissa Pinkola Estes - author
President Gerald Ford - politician
Melissa Gilbert - actress
Tim Green – football player/commentator
Scott Hamilton - figure skater
John Hancock - politician
Debbie Harry - singer
Faith Hill - country singer
Langston Hughes - poet and writer
Jesse Jackson - minister
Brent Jasmer - actor
Jesus - adopted by Joseph the carpenter (Bible)
Steve Jobs - entrepreneur: co-founder of Apple computer & Pixar
Matthew Laborteaux - actor
Patrick Laborteaux - actor
John Lennon - musician
Rep. Jim Lightfoot - politician
Art Linkletter - comedian
Ray Liotta - actor
Charlotte Anne Lopez - Miss Teen USA
Greg Louganis - athlete
Malcolm X - civil rights leader
Nelson Mandela - politician
James McArthur - actor
Tim McGraw - singer
Sarah McLachlan - singer
James Michener - author
Tom Monaghan - entrepreneur
Moses - Biblical leader
Dan O'Brien - decathlete
Jim Palmer - athlete
Edgar Allen Poe - poet, writer
Priscilla Presley - actress
Michael Reagan - dancer
Nancy Reagan - First Lady
Reno - performance artist, comedian
Wilson Riles - educator
Eleanor Roosevelt - First Lady
Jean Jacques Rousseau - philosopher
Victoria Rowell - actress
Buffy Sainte-Marie - actress
Sen. Paul H. Shin - politician
Dave Thomas - entrepreneur: founder of Wendy's
Leo Tolstoy - writer
Anthony Williams - politician
Jett Williams - country singer and author