

## ASK ABOUT ADOPTION

# WHAT TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

# ADOPTION



## WHY IT IS IMPORTANT FOR TEACHERS TO KNOW ABOUT ADOPTION

Adoption can be a wonderful outcome for children who are not able to live with their birth parents. However, when adopted children join their new family, they bring life experiences that might include maltreatment and/or trauma. As a result, during the time leading into adoption and after the adoption is finalized, these children might exhibit some unique behaviors in the classroom. Therefore, it is important for educators to understand the reasons underlying the behaviors versus solely focusing on the behaviors. Common emotions and issues among children who have been adopted include the following:

- grappling with issues related to identity, belonging, or attachment;
- managing complex and/or non-traditional relationships and roles with their birth family;
- experiencing loss and grief; and
- figuring out how to be in a family of a different culture or ethnic group.

Outside of the family network, teachers and other school personnel play the largest role in children's development. Because children spend a great deal of their daily lives in school settings, it is important for teachers to be aware of adoption and the behaviors that some children — both pre- and post-adoption — might exhibit in the classroom. Many teachers have found it extremely beneficial to develop a relationship with the adoptive parents and work with them to determine a classroom routine that works well for their child.



### DID YOU KNOW

- Children & youth are adopted at all ages; median age of children adopted through the public child welfare system is 5 years old.
- The U.S. has more than 1.5 million adoptees younger than 18 years.
- In 2014, 116,360 children were adopted in the U.S., of whom 75,337 were adopted by non-relatives.
- Adoption can occur in a variety of ways: 1) private domestic adoptions; 2) public adoptions (from foster care); 3) intercountry adoptions; and 4) stepparent or family member adoption that does not involve a private agency.
- In 2015, about 440,000 children received Title IV-E adoption subsidies, which means they were most likely adopted from the public child welfare system.

## CREATING AN ADOPTION SENSITIVE CLASSROOM

Teachers can help create a classroom that is sensitive to adoption by viewing assignments through the eyes of a child who has been adopted. Without intention, school assignments, classroom decorations, and even the selection of information to share about a country of heritage can potentially cause stress to a child who is adopted. The list below suggests some small changes teachers can make to ensure their classroom is inclusive for families formed through adoption:



### ASSIGNMENTS

- Be sensitive about developing assignments that require knowledge of birth history.
  - » Family trees can be a difficult, stressful activity for children who do not know the details of their birth history.
  - » Assignments that study a child's biological traits can be difficult if children do not know one or both of their birth parents.
  - » Assignments that require bringing in baby pictures can be difficult if the child does not have any pictures.



### HOLIDAYS

- Be aware that holidays can be difficult times for some children and try to tweak these celebrations to be inclusive of all children.
  - » Birthdays, Mother's Day, and Father's Day might bring up a wide range of emotions in children who are not living with their birth parents.
  - » Adopted children might celebrate an "adoption day" or "coming home" day that is just as important as a birthday.

- » Mother's or Father's Day celebrations can be changed to Parent Day celebrations



### LESSONS

- Recognize that, before being adopted, some children might have experienced one or more forms of trauma that will require some variation in the teaching process or accommodation in classroom routines.
  - » Be aware that isolating punishments such as time out or separation from the class might trigger a negative or unexpected response in some children.
  - » If a child exhibits a negative, unexpected response, remain calm and help to get the child regulated before discussing discipline or consequences for the behavior.
  - » Allow extra time for transitions between activities.
  - » Write out a schedule that enables the child to visually follow the schedule structure and organization.
  - » Inform the child when there is going to be a change in routine.



### ADOPTION STATUS

- Recognize that children might be sensitive about their adoption status.
  - » Maintain confidentiality: refrain from referring to a child's adoption within the classroom or in conversations with other school personnel unless the child has disclosed the information himself or herself.
  - » Intervene if classmates are making comments or asking questions about a child's family composition.
  - » Do not assume that a child of a particular nationality speaks the country's language or knows about the country's culture.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway includes a list of Adoption Resources for Teachers (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school/teachers/>), including information about possible assignments and additional ideas for creating a sensitive classroom. One “low-touch” suggestion for creating a sensitive classroom is to simply include adoption-sensitive books in your classroom and learning stations; some suggested titles are listed below. Additional ideas for adoption-sensitive books and movies are available on the Center for Adoption Support and Education (<http://adoptionssupport.org/education-resources/for-parents-families/free-resources-links/>) website.

- *We're Different, We're the Same* (Sesame Street) by Bobbi Jane Kates (ages 2-6)
- *How I Was Adopted* (Mulberry Books) by Joanna Cole (ages 4-8)
- *Lucy's Family Tree* (Tilbury House) by Karen Halvorsen Schreck (ages 8-11)
- *How It Feels to Be Adopted* (Knopf) by Jill Krementz (ages 12 and older)
- *Three Little Words: A Memoir* (Atheneum) by Ashley Rhodes-Courter (juvenile)

In some instances, before joining their adoptive family, children might have experienced maltreatment. This maltreatment may have led to trauma that impacts the child's behaviors. Parents can be a great resource for helping teachers understand their child's needs and how small adaptations can be made throughout the day to help their child succeed in school. The list below highlights resources to help teachers manage classroom behavior of children who may be grappling with the after effects of traumatic experiences:

- Department of Education, Training and Employment. (2013). *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatized children*. Retrieved from <http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/pdfs/calmer-classrooms-guide.pdf>
- Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. (n.d.). *Helping traumatized children learn*. Retrieved from <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/>
- MONARCH: Trauma-Informed Education. (n.d.). *The MONARCH room*. Retrieved from <http://www.monarchroom-traumainformededucation.com/the-monarch-room.html>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2008). *Child trauma toolkit for educators*. Retrieved from <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/trauma-toolkit>



- National Education Association. (2016). *How trauma is changing children's brains*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/XiMmPq>
- National Education Association. (2016). *Teaching children from poverty and trauma*. Retrieved from <http://nea.org/povertyhandbook>
- National Education Association. (n.d.). *Communities group on trauma-informed classrooms*. Retrieved from [mynea360.org](http://mynea360.org)
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