



Training for Child Welfare Professionals

The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals is designed to enhance the capacity of child welfare professionals to understand and more effectively address the complex mental health needs of children who are moving to permanency through adoption or guardianship or have already achieved adoption or guardianship. This training focuses on the knowledge, values and skills needed to understand and assess children’s complex needs; make appropriate referrals; develop effective case plans; support and adequately prepare children for permanency; and help adoptive and guardianship parents provide the therapeutic and nurturing parenting so vital to children’s positive development and family stability. In addition to lessons geared to child welfare, adoption and guardianship professionals providing direct services, the curriculum includes lessons and resources for child welfare supervisors to support the application of learning by their staff in daily practice.

Module 1: A Case for Adoption Competency

Module 1 provides an overview of the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals and makes the case for the need for adoption competency. Lessons in this module orient participants to the training and training objectives, highlight the guiding principles that provide the foundation for work with children and families from an adoption or guardianship lens, provide context for the changes in adoption and guardianship options and practice today; and emphasize the urgent need for permanency for children and youth and the negative consequences of impermanence.

Lesson 1: Overview, purpose and need for the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals

Lesson 2: Guiding Principles that support effective mental health practice with children and families

Lesson 3: Adoption and guardianship options today – how practice has changed

Lesson 4: Children’s urgent need for permanence

Learning Objectives

- Acquire appropriate expectations for the training based on an accurate understanding of the focus, nature, and main goals of the training.
- Recognize the elevated risk for an array of mental health disorders of children who are in or have exited foster care to adoption or guardianship and the great need for adoption-competent child welfare and mental health services.
- Identify the core knowledge, values, and skills that characterize an adoption competent child welfare professional.

- Define the guiding principles that guide casework and clinical interventions that address the unique mental health needs of children and their adoptive and guardianship families.
- Describe adoption and guardianship options and historic trends that influence adoption and guardianship policy and practice today.
- Comprehend the urgent need for permanence, the negative impact of impermanency on children, youth, and families, and the importance of achieving and sustaining permanence for healthy development.
- Examine the core mental health issues that are addressed in casework and clinical interventions with children and their adoptive and guardianship families.
- Achieve a beginning recognition of the critical role that child welfare professionals can play to address core mental health issues through effective casework practices.

Module 2: Understanding and Addressing Mental Health Needs of Children Moving Towards or Having Achieved Permanence through Adoption or Guardianship

Module 2 provides context for the complex mental health needs of children experiencing adoption or guardianship and the importance of helping children/youth understand their life stories. Lessons focus on new frameworks for assessment, case planning and treatment planning; skills and techniques for helping children/youth make sense of their stories; skills and techniques for helping parents and guardians to understand their child’s behavior in the context of their experiences and reframe behavior; and how to refer to and collaborate effectively with adoption competent mental health clinicians to address mental health challenges.

Lesson 1: Overview of mental health needs of children in foster, adoptive and guardianship families

Lesson 2: Mental health assessment and treatment planning through the lens of adoption and guardianship

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role with children: Addressing the complex needs of children in adoptive and guardianship families

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role in working with parents to address children’s mental health needs

Lesson 5: Child welfare professional’s role with community mental health providers

Learning Objectives

- Define the normative behaviors of children in/from foster care in the context of their unique experiences and current functioning.
- Recognize limitations of current diagnostic assessment and medication practices when used with children with foster care experiences.
- Recognize that practices deemed evidence-based may not, by themselves, address the range of challenges of children with foster care experiences and may not have demonstrated effectiveness with the specific population.
- Identify and describe key features of formal therapies and daily routines that have been demonstrated to be effective in addressing the effects of early trauma and promoting attachment.
- Identify and describe specific techniques that help children know more about their stories, work through their past experiences, and form healthy relationships.

- Identify and describe strategies to assist adoptive and guardianship parents and other caregivers to reframe behaviors based on an understanding of the child’s story, gain insight into their own skills and capacity to parent a particular child, and engage in parenting that promotes healing.
- Identify and describe strategies for effective collaboration with mental health professionals including strategies for identifying a qualified and appropriate mental health professional, providing salient history when making referrals, clarifying appropriate treatment expectations, and assuring that parents are involved with the therapeutic process.

Module 3: Enhancing Attachment and Bonding for Children Moving Towards/Having Achieved Permanence through Adoption and Guardianship

Module 3 focuses on the heart of child welfare practice – understanding the process of forming attachments and the impact of poor nurture, separations and abrupt moves on that process. Lessons emphasize the importance of early relationships and experiences; the continuum of attachment styles; what professionals can do to promote attachment; skills and techniques to provide attachment-based casework with children and youth; strategies for working with parents and mental health professionals to promote felt safety and secure attachment; and evidence-informed attachment-based therapies.

Lesson 1: The impact of attachment and separation on the development of children in adoption and guardianship families

Lesson 2: Supporting attachment after children’s separation from birth family

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role in working with children to support healthy attachment

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role in working with parents to enhance attachment

Lesson 5: Child welfare professional’s role in working with mental health providers to support attachment

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the critical importance of attachment and the impacts of early insecure attachment on brain structure and social, emotional, verbal, and cognitive development.
- Describe the process of early attachment formation, four categories of attachment styles in children, and behavioral outcomes associated with each style.
- Identify and describe cultural differences in attachment patterns and implications for casework practice.
- Recognize the negative impact of removal and placement in foster care on children’s ability to form secure attachments and critical need to support and comfort children through necessary moves from first placement to permanent adoptive or guardianship family.
- Subscribe to the belief that secure attachments can be built/re-built and to a commitment to maintain positive attachment relationships from children’s pasts.
- Define four primary goals in doing attachment casework with children.
- Identify and describe child welfare practice strategies and tools to minimize the relational trauma of interrupted attachments and to promote children’s healthy attachments in new families.
- Define four primary goals in attachment work with adoptive and guardian parents.
- Identify and describe strategies and tools for helping families to understand and honor their children’s previous attachments and unique story, address attachment challenges, create a healing environment that facilitates attachment, and employ therapeutic parenting strategies that enhance children’s safety and attachment.

- Identify and describe the primary therapeutic models for attachment work and how to make appropriate referrals, monitor treatment progress and outcomes, and collaborate effectively with mental health professionals.

Module 4: How Race, Ethnicity, Culture, Class and Diversity Impact the Adoption and Guardianship Experience and Mental Health Needs of Children

In Module 4, participants will learn how race, ethnicity, culture, class and diversity may impact a child’s experience of adoption or guardianship and the mental health issues that may occur.

Lessons focus on understanding challenges in various types of diverse families – single parent, transracial/transcultural, families with children or parents who are LGBTQ, children with special needs and kinship caregivers; understanding the development of racial identity and using skills to have and promote courageous conversations about race/ethnicity/culture in transracial and transcultural placements; strategies for addressing microaggressions, bullying and discrimination; the challenges experienced by and strategies for supporting LGBTQ youth and families headed by LGBT parents.

Lesson 1: The impact of diversity on the adoption and guardianship experience

Lesson 2: Understanding the mental health needs of children in diverse adoptive and guardianship families

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role with children in talking about race, racial identity and diversity

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role in talking with parents in transracial, transcultural, and other diverse families

Lesson 5: Child welfare professional’s role in working with LGBTQ families

Learning Objectives

- Recognize race as a socially constructed concept that has a powerful impact psychologically, socially, and politically.
- Recognize the effects of racism, whether overt or covert, on the mental health functioning of members of groups affected.
- Describe the dynamics of racial identity and racial socialization, implications for the mental health of children and youth, and specific strategies to promote positive racial identity.
- Develop greater awareness of the diversity in their personal universe and their own biases.
- Assess more accurately children’s behavior, distinguishing culturally-based and learned behavior from pathology.
- Identify and employ child welfare practices and tools for helping families to value and honor their children’s cultural, racial, and ethnic heritage.
- Identify the strengths and challenges of each type of non-traditional families (e.g., transracial, transcultural, single parent, kinship, LGBTQ), implications for the mental health of children and youth, and specific strategies to promote family well-being.
- Identify and describe the implications of class, emotions underlying problem behaviors sometimes observed when children move from poverty to plenty, and strategies that support successful adoption and guardianship.

Module 5: The Impact of Loss and Grief Experience on Children’s Mental Health

Module 5 focuses on the central role of loss and grief in foster care, adoption or guardianship and how loss and grief impact the mental health of children. Lessons will emphasize the different kinds of loss and grief, including ambiguous and unresolved losses; focus on how losses and grief manifest developmentally, behaviorally and emotionally and strategies for helping children heal; provide strategies and evidence-informed therapies to help professionals and parents support grieving children; and highlight the importance of openness and maintaining family, community and cultural connections to mitigate losses.

Lesson 1: The impact of ambiguous and unresolved loss on emotional adjustment and mental health

Lesson 2: Understanding loss and grief in the context of developmental stages, emotional adjustment and mental health of children

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role in helping children deal with loss and grief

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role with adoptive parents and guardians and facilitating healthy transitions

Lesson 5: Maintaining connections and openness and the child welfare professional’s role with mental health providers in helping children deal with loss and grief

Learning Objectives

- Identify and describe the different kinds of grief and loss.
- Describe how grief and loss manifests developmentally, behaviorally, and in emotional expression.
- Recognize how cultural values and beliefs may affect expressions of loss and grief.
- Assess more accurately children’s behavior, distinguishing manifestations of unresolved grief from pathology.
- Employ casework practices and tools with children/youth that facilitate conversations about loss grief in a sensitive, empathetic, and timely way, facilitate the grieving process, and build readiness for new relationships.
- Articulate the child welfare professional’s role in preparing, educating, and supporting parents to understand support the grief process and build readiness for new relationships.
- Identify and describe how openness in adoption and guardianship and maintaining connections can ameliorate loss and grief and assess an appropriate level of openness that is in a particular child’s best interest.

Module 6: The Impact of Early and Ongoing Trauma on Child and Family Development, Brain Growth and Development, and Mental Health

Module 6 focuses on the important role of trauma, including trauma from separation, on brain development, behavior and mental health of children experiencing adoption or guardianship. Lessons provide a primer on brain development and the impact of early adverse experiences on children; the importance of shifting thinking from “what’s wrong with you” to “what happened to you”; understanding triggers of past trauma and therapeutic parenting strategies to help parents manage trauma triggers and build trust, safety, and healing; skills and strategies for helping children make meaning of their trauma stories and work through their trauma experiences; and collaborating with mental health therapists to provide evidence-informed therapies to support children’s healing.

Lesson 1: Traumatic experiences of children achieving permanence through adoption and guardianship

Lesson 2: Understanding the psychological impact of trauma and children’s adaptations

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role in working with children to identify and address the impact of trauma

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role in working with parents to understand and address the impact of trauma

Lesson 5: Child welfare professional’s role in working with mental health and other professionals to address the impact of trauma and the impact of secondary traumatic stress on child welfare professionals

Learning Objectives

- Identify and describe the types of trauma frequently experienced by children in the child welfare system.
- Recognize and assess the physical, neurochemical, and psychological impact of trauma and trauma-related mental health needs of children.
- Describe the link between traumatic experiences and “survival behaviors.”
- Reduce system-related trauma for children by minimizing moves in care, preparing children for moves or other events, and supporting them through necessary transitions.
- Employ casework practices and tools with children/youth and parents to build resilience and facilitate healing from trauma.
- Articulate important goals to address with parents to enhance the child’s “felt safety.”
- Employ the goals and strategies of therapeutic parenting and identify when these are needed by a specific child.
- Recognize symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, burnout and vicarious trauma and develop strategies to reduce the effects.

Module 7: Positive Identity Formation and the Impact of Adoption and Guardianship

Module 7 focuses on the nature of identity formation in the context of adoption and guardianship and how birth family, history, race, ethnicity and culture impact identity formation. Lessons focus on understanding identity, barriers to positive identity and the importance of “knowing who you are”; the role of the professional in helping children tell the story of who they are; understanding the “Six Stuck Spots” in identity formation and the role of openness in positive identity formation; strategies for helping children and youth do the work of understanding who they are, where they came from, and where they are going; strategies for working with parents to integrate the history of birth family and influences of significant others in the lives of their children; and collaborating with mental health therapists to support children’s identity work.

Lesson 1: Overview: A developmental understanding of identity formation

Lesson 2: Identity formation during the adolescent years and challenges for youth

Lesson 3: Child welfare professional’s role with children in supporting positive identity formation

Lesson 4: Child welfare professional’s role with parents in helping children and youth with positive identity formation

Lesson 5: Child welfare professional’s role with youth search and reunion journey and collaboration with mental health providers

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the importance of self-identity, how it is formed, and its relationship to mental health.
- Articulate the process of identity formation during adolescence and areas of vulnerability or concern, including the “Six Stuck Spots” for foster or adopted/guardianship youth.
- Employ casework strategies and tools to talk with youth and parents to address youths’ struggles to integrate disparate aspects of their history, gather information, and provide positive influences on identity.
- Describe the role of openness in positive identity formation.
- Prepare adoptive parents or guardians to develop communicative openness in addressing children’s questions and concerns about their past, their birth family, adoption or guardianship, and other issues related to their identity.
- Articulate the child welfare professional’s role in helping parents/guardians to be open with youth about the truth in developmentally appropriate ways and the need to repeat information as youth’s understanding of information changes.
- Describe the role that Search and Reunion plays in the identity formation of the adolescent, and honor the need for knowledge.
- Collaborate effectively with mental health professionals in supporting the youth’s search and reunion journey and identity formation process

Module 8: The Lifelong Journey: Maintaining Children’s Stability and Well-being in Adoptive and Guardianship Families

Module 8 looks at the factors that shape adoption or guardianship adjustment and facilitate the child and family’s ongoing safety, permanency and well-being. Lessons will explore the needs of children and families after adoption or guardianship and the kinds of services that help to sustain them; the role of the professional in preparing children and families to address mental health needs throughout the adoption or guardianship process; and, strategies for providing support to strengthen and sustain family stability post adoption or guardianship.

Lesson 1: Risk and protective factors impacting child and family adjustment after adoption or guardianship

Lesson 2: The complex needs of children and families following adoption or guardianship

Lesson 3: A developmental framework for normative challenges and evolving mental health needs of children and their adoptive and guardianship families

Lesson 4: Matching child and family needs to post-adoption and guardianship services

Lesson 5: Review of lessons and tools to enhance adoption mental health competence

Learning Objectives

- Articulate the complexity of factors influencing post-adoption or guardianship adjustment, including normative developmental challenges and the most important parental qualities for sustaining permanency.
- Assess risk factors that challenge adjustment and protective factors that support positive adjustment
- Articulate the continuum of mental health-related needs in adoptive or guardianship families and plan with parents/guardians how to address these needs.
- Define the qualities in a therapist that indicate adoption-competent help and unhelpful help.
- Describe the impact of resurfacing loss and trauma for youth and families and help them plan to address the impact.

- Employ casework practices to help parents access supports and services after permanency and reframe help-seeking as a strength.
- Describe the continuum of available formal and informal post-adoption or guardianship services to meet family needs.
- Recognize the primary types and causes of instability and stages of adoption or guardianship breakdown

Supervisor Lessons

A short additional lesson for Supervisors is included with each module (a total of 3 extra hours) to help Supervisors support their staff to apply learning from NTI in their daily casework practice. Suggestions are provided to help build or strengthen staff skills and to address common challenges supervisors may encounter from staff. A downloadable ***Supervisor Coaching and Activity Guide*** provides supervisors with a variety of activities to choose from to use with their teams or staff individually.

Suggested activities and examples

- **Team discussion or self-assessment about attitudes, biases, concerns**
 - Use suggested conversation prompts to discuss worker biases about placing children with relative caregivers
- **Review of a case and discussion/processing of learned concepts**
 - Have workers review an assessment and discuss child’s risk and protective factors. What additional information would be helpful to have?
- **Roleplay of applied skills**
 - What conversation starters would workers use with parents to discuss the importance of honoring their child’s culture? How could workers better prepare or transition a child for a move to prevent abrupt separation and re-traumatization?
- **Shared activities as a team**
 - Have your team develop a format for Life Books if there is not already one in use. Invite a panel to come to team meeting to discuss an issue, share information about a community resource for families.
- **Trial of suggested tools**
 - Have workers use the ACEs survey with prospective parents to assess their trauma history and discuss what they learned. Discuss questions that could be added to your intake/assessment process to better assess a child’s trauma history.

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