S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators

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Center for Adoption Support and Education

www.adoptionsupport.org
Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc.

a non-profit adoptive family support center, since 1998

With decades of experience, our mission is to strengthen the well-being of children and families of all adoptive experiences by providing them the adoption-centered services and resources they need, including:

• Pre- and post-adoption counseling, assessment and therapeutic services
• Individual and group therapy for kids, teens and adults
• Crisis intervention, support and assistance with school issues
• Training, education & interactive workshops – for families, educators and professionals
• Nationally recognized post-adoption models
• TAC: Training for Adoption Competency
• Our newest Game: 52 Ways to Talk about Adoption
• Award-winning print publications, articles, newsletters and online resources

For more information, visit www.adoptionsupport.org
The numbers are growing...

- 4% of US children are adopted
- 2-4% of American families include an adopted child
- 120,000 children are adopted annually
- 500,000 youngsters are in foster care
- The numbers of children in foster care placements are expected to increase
The Emotional Impact of Adoption on Learning

Sound research in adoption has found that the majority of children adopted in early infancy show no abnormal adjustment problems until they enter school, or until about the ages of 6-8. As awareness of adoption impacts them—and as others begin to question their adoptive “status”—their learning is more likely to be impacted by the emotional experience of adoption.

- David Brodzinsky, Ph.D.
Presentation Goals

- Learn what educators need to know about the adopted child
- Discuss strategies for communicating with school staff
- Share ways to advocate for what your child needs to be successful at school
- Identify strategies for creating an adoption-sensitive school for ALL students
Communicating with School Staff

- Potential Barriers
  - Worry about how the child will be perceived
  - Feel the school will be/has been unresponsive
  - Child has asked you not to share

- What should be shared?

- Who should I talk to?
When communicating with School Staff

- Parents don’t want their kids to feel singled out/stigmatized; this is why they often don’t talk with school staff
- DON’T tell the child’s whole story and be clear why you are sharing your child is adopted
- Consider your child’s age as this will impact your role
Let’s walk into the children’s world . . .
For children who are not familiar with adoption

It can be CONFUSING.
It can be **FRIGHTENING** for kids...
It involves sadness . . .

Adoption stories are often about loss, sometimes tragedy
Where do children learn about adoption?
What do they learn?
What do they see around them that is about adoption?
What do they learn about how adoption comes about?
Who are their role models?
Factors That Impact Adopted Children in Their World at School
Factors That Impact Adopted Children in Their World at School

1. Child’s perception of him/herself as an adoptee, as well as his/her unique strengths and vulnerabilities.

2. Peer perception of adoptive families and children who joined their families through adoption.

3. Non-adopted children commonly seek out adoptees in an effort to comprehend adoption on any level.
Factors That Impact Adopted Children in Their World at School

4. Bias and misinformation in media (children’s common source of “facts”) are reflected in attitudes toward adoptees

5. Outdated misinformation and overly-dramatic stories continue to provide the foundation for how a new generation of children view adoption
Factors That Impact Adopted Children in Their World at School

6. Everyday references to adoption which reflect society’s knowledge or bias regarding aspects of adoption.

7. Perception of others in the community about adoptive families, especially those that are trans-cultural or trans-racial.
8. Perception and knowledge of school personnel about adoption.

- Teachers may have pre-conceived notions about adoption, based on personal experiences

- Educators do not have basic information to help them address issues as they arise: Children’s understanding about adoption, normal emotions, common challenges, appropriate language, ideas for educating ALL children
Ask yourself: What happens in your child’s school?

- How can children learn about adoption?
- Will they see or hear something that is about adoption but NOT about another child in the school?
- Do teachers find ways to increase knowledge and comfort with adoption even if there are no adopted children in that school?
- Do adopted children feel equal in family status?
Educators are a wonderful resource for helping ALL children feel positive about adoption as a way to build families!
Teachers can help

*Teachers are often the single most important influence outside the home.*

- Trusted to know accurate information
- Valued by children for their advice and opinions
- Trained to provide information at an appropriate level of understanding
- Aware of how to help children make the information relevant to themselves
- Knowledgeable about individual personalities and learning styles that will impact understanding
THE FIVE As

Acceptance
Advocacy
Adoption Support
Assistance
Assignments

S.A.F.E. at School\textsuperscript{sm}: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators
1. Acceptance

Ask school personnel to normalize adoption/adoptive families by demonstrating both personal and social acceptance of adoption as one way to build families.
Teachers should know

• What **you** believe matters to your kids. Your unconscious stereotypes/assumptions will be communicated to the class.

• All families are “real” families, and all parents are “real parents”. The language you use in your classroom matters!

_A Memo to My Fellow Teachers, Adapted from Adoptive Families magazine, January/February 2002_
RESPECTFUL ADOPTION LANGUAGE

Constructive adoption language helps us to convey a more positive image of adoption, and gives children tools for talking with others about adoption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIVE IMAGE</th>
<th>NEGATIVE IMAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth parent</td>
<td>Real, natural parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First, other mother</td>
<td>My adopted child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>Blood relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biological relative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make an adoption plan,</td>
<td>Give away, surrender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place for adoption</td>
<td>Put up for adoption, didn’t keep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child in need of adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are an adoptive family</td>
<td>Hard-to-place child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My children are adopted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations for Teachers

Preschool

• Simply mention words “adoption” or “adopted” as you talk about babies and families
• Role play getting ready for the arrival of an adopted child

Early Elementary

• Discuss different kinds of families
• If a student has a baby born into family, add that some children join their families through adoption
• Consider a class activity to celebrate National Adoption Awareness Month (November)
2. Accuracy

Suggest that school personnel educate students about adoption/adoptive families by providing accurate information at the appropriate time and in an interesting way.
In order to promote accuracy...

Include information about adoption in lessons related to:

- Different kinds of families
- Genetics
- History
- Literature
- National Adoption Month
- The media
- Well-known, successful adoptees
Teachers should know

• It is important to have books/resources in your classroom that represent different cultures and different families.

_A Memo to My Fellow Teachers_, Adapted from _Adoptive Families_ magazine, January/February 2002
Recommendations for Teachers

**Preschool**

- Read stories that include adoption
- Ensure pictures and books in classroom reflect diversity

**Early Elementary**

- Read stories about adoption
- Correct potential confusion when the word “adoption” is used in connection with animals, etc.
3. Assignments

Ask teachers to construct curricula to ensure inclusion of students in adoptive families.
Teachers should know

• Some assignments may be challenging for adopted students. Not everyone has a baby picture or can easily construct a family tree.

_A Memo to My Fellow Teachers_, Adapted from _Adoptive Families_ magazine, January/February 2002
Baby Pictures

Assignment: Bring in a baby picture – may be used to post on bulletin board or part of larger project.

Grade level: Preschool to 1st grade, again in junior/senior high

Why it’s challenging: Children adopted at an older age may not have baby pictures

Alternatives for teachers: Ask children to bring in photos of when they were “younger” or draw a picture of themselves

Approaches for parents: Let your child know that you wish you had photos too and may say that you’re sure she was a beautiful baby.

Tackling Tricky Assignments, Adoptive Families magazine, 2007 and S.A.F.E. at Schoolsm: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators
**Family Tree**

**Assignment:** Draw a family tree – either as a literal tree, with branches, or in diagram form – showing family relationships.

**Grade level:** Elementary school

**Why it’s challenging:** Format may not accommodate birth, foster and adoptive relatives; class may not know child is adopted

**Alternatives for teachers:** Offer formats that show roots as well as branches or instead of a tree, ask students to create a family forest or neighborhood of houses; ask kids to include whoever they consider to be family

**Approaches for parents:** Allow your child to choose which family or families to portray or encourage him to design his own format

*Tackling Tricky Assignments, Adoptive Families* magazine, 2007 and S.A.F.E. at School℠: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators
Charting Genetic Traits

Assignment: Diagram or write about the presence of a particular trait in the child’s family, such as eye or hair color.

Grade level: junior/senior high

Why it’s challenging: Charting traits in an adoptive family may raise unwanted questions; a child may not have any or little information about birth family.

Alternatives for teachers: Study genetics in insects or plants; use historical examples such as the prevalence of inherited diseases in the royal families of Europe.

Approaches for parents: Help your child identify friends or a biologically related family group, such as grandparents or cousins, on which to base genetic chart.
Middle & High School

• Suggest adoption as a theme for essay or journal writing
• Introduce family history assignments with sensitivity to other types of families
• Discuss adoption in science class in connection with genetic studies: inherited vs. acquired
• Talk about families formed by adoption in sex education classes; use positive adoption language
4. Assistance

Recommend that school personnel identify appropriate boundaries and language about adoption/adoptive families.
Teachers should know

- Intrusive questions about adoption are the norm for most school age kids. Be aware of what is being said and have a zero-tolerance policy for bullying re: any kind of difference (including adoption!)

- Children born outside of the U.S. are not/ and should not be looked to as the “experts” on the culture and language of their birth countries.

- Help your students feel empowered to share/not share what they want regarding their adoption story. Never share something about a child’s story without his/her permission.

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For example...

Let adopted children know that you will support them if questions or comments get out of hand!

They are likely to assume they must handle ADOPTION on their own. This can create feelings of shame.
Recommendations for Teachers

Later Elementary

• Children of this age want to fit in – don’t want to be singled out for being adopted

Middle & High School

• If student says “I would never place a child for adoption.” Educate class about adoption as a loving choice
5. Advocacy

Clarify that your school will take action to support students in adoptive families if comments or questions about adoption/adoptive families become invasive or critical. Zero tolerance for teasing/bullying.
What have we learned?

- Educators can be advocates for adopted children and help them feel more comfortable about their families.
- Creating an environment for adopted children will help ALL children feel safe at school.
C.A.S.E. Resources

- S.A.F.E. at School Manual
- W.I.S.E. UP! Powerbooks
- Free monthly webinars
- www.adoptionsupport.org
Center for Adoption Support & Education welcomes you to

**Strengthening Your Family**

an empowering and inspiring webinar series

**S.A.F.E. at School**

featuring Lisa Dominguez, LCSW-C

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