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C.A.S.E. Fact Sheet Series No. 9

ADOPTION AT SCHOOL

BY MARILYN SCHOETTLE, M.A. AND ELLEN SINGER, LCSW-C

Of all the experiences we have in life that help us to know who we are and what we can be, school is surely one of the most powerful. School's enormous influence makes it a critical component in the development of children's self-concept, including what it means to be part of an adoptive family. From experience and research, we know that it is normal for children and teens to have a wide variety of feelings and thoughts about having been adopted, which can impact school performance in different ways. In turn, kids are often greatly affected by how others at school perceive adoption. If they can receive positive feedback, they will have a better chance of feeling self-confident about themselves.

TEACHERS ARE KEY TO ADOPTION AWARENESS

The school environment can be a wonderful support for adoptees and adoptive families. If educators are comfortable with the subject of adoption, there are many opportunities to help students learn that adoptive families are permanent and real. When teachers understand the normal emotions of adopted children, they can develop effective strategies to address some of the challenges the children face at school, including certain assignments and intrusive questions from others. Most importantly, educators are powerful adult role models who are in a position to easily and simply validate for all children that adoption is a good way to build families.

Unfortunately, educators do not normally receive training to prepare them to talk about adoption. Instead, most of them form their knowledge base like the majority of the public, that is, through personal contact with members of the adoption circle (including students who were adopted) and what they are exposed to in the media. The old standard of secrecy around adoption and the lack of preparation results in uncertainty about what to say. The consequence is often careful silence on the part of educators when adoption comes up at school. The possibility of support is lost, and for small children in particular, their teacher's silence can be interpreted as disapproval or shame.

Parents are not likely to know all that is being said about adoption at school. By 3rd or 4th grade, most children keep that information to themselves because they realize that it might upset their parents. However, we have learned from both adult adopted persons and children that adoptees are often asked the toughest questions about their adoption stories when they are at school. The questions and comments can be generated for a variety of reasons – curiosity, nosiness, or bullying. School personnel may not hear all of the communication about adoption because adopted children are not told that they can seek help from teachers or guidance counselors when the questions or comments become too much for them to handle. With education about ways to support adopted children, teachers can be made aware how critically important they can be in providing adopted kids with emotional support.



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WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Parents can promote the need for open, informative communication about adoption in schools by talking to teachers and providing them with information about resources for learning more about adoption on their own. Authors such as Holly van Gulden, David Brodzinsky, Joyce Maguire Pavao, and C.A.S.E. C.E.O., Debbie Riley have written excellent books that provide a foundation of knowledge for educators. It is important to remember that teachers need to always be cognizant of the needs of all of their students, and therefore parents are likely to be most successful when they, too, consider the rest of the classroom as they make their suggestions.

Some parents have found their schools to be receptive to the formation of a parents' committee to advise school staff. For example, the committee might make suggestions regarding speakers about adoption, National Adoption Month activities, or ways to revise assignments that can pose challenges for adopted students, such as timelines, autobiographies, or even the study of genes and family history. Teachers are not always free to change their curriculum, but are usually glad to know how to adjust work for all students that will be more inclusive of differences.

Another way to promote understanding about adoption is to empower children and teens to educate their peers and teachers themselves. Parents can share with their children some of the questions they are asked, and discuss how they handled each situation. Children can be helped to understand that all members of the adoption circle are beginning to speak up to define the boundaries for appropriate discussion about adoption, and that children can let their teachers know more about adoption (but not necessarily about their personal adoption story).



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RESOURCES

S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators, A Manual for Teachers, Educators and Counselors is written specifically to promote a positive, informative environment about adoption and adoptive families in the schools. The manual provides background information about children's developmental understanding of adoption, as well as strategies and guidelines for opening communication about this subject that was for so long kept secretive.

It is available on C.A.S.E.'s website.—adoptionsupport.org.

W.I.S.E Up! Powerbook is a workbook for children based on a simple, easy to grasp program that C.A.S.E. developed to help children handle the many questions, comments and misunderstandings of others about adoption such as "*Where is your real family?*" "*Why did they give you away?*" "*Why don't you look like your mom and dad?*" **It is also available online at C.A.S.E.'s web site—adoptionsupport.org.**

An important resource for educators is Child Welfare Information Gateway at www.childwelfare.gov