



TOPICAL BRIEF

NO. 9

ADOPTION AT SCHOOL

BY CENTER FOR ADOPTION SUPPORT AND EDUCATION

Children spend a large amount of their time in school, so it is a critical component in the development of their 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 affect their school performance in different ways. In turn, kids are often greatly affected by how others at school perceive adoption. If they have positive experiences at school, adopted children will have a better chance of feeling self-confident.

CHALLENGES AT SCHOOL

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 (those with family trees, genetics, baby pictures, etc.) and intrusive questions from others. Most importantly, educators are powerful adult role models who can 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 get their knowledge like most of the public—through personal contact with members of the adoption circle (including students who were adopted) and the media or pop culture. The lack of preparation results in uncertainty about what to say, which often leads to silence when adoption comes up at school. The possibility of support is lost, and for young 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 third or fourth grade, most children keep that information to themselves because they realize that it might upset their parents. However, we have learned from adoptees that they are often asked the toughest questions about their adoption stories at school. The questions and comments can be generated for various reasons, including curiosity, nosiness, or bullying. School personnel may not hear about the communication because parents and administrators have not told adopted children that they can seek help from teachers or counselors when questions or comments become too much for them to handle.

For many adopted children, especially those who were adopted after being in foster care or at an older age, school may present other challenges. It's a time when fetal alcohol spectrum disorder or learning disabilities

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may first become apparent. For older children, multiple moves or school absences may mean they are behind their schoolmates. For children who have been abused or neglected, their trauma may lead to behavior challenges, difficulties with changes or transitions, or anxiety about school, all of which can affect their learning and social interactions during the school day.

When teachers and other school staff are educated about ways to support adopted children, they play a critical role in providing adopted kids with emotional and educational support.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Because most school staff don't have adoption expertise, parents can make a big difference by sharing what they know with their children's schools. Suggestions include:

- **Encourage the school counselors, social workers, psychologists and others in their children's schools to enroll in the [School Based Mental Health Professionals Training](#)** – a free web-based training developed by C.A.S.E. with 17.5 free continuing education credits from the National Board of Certified Counselors and the National Association of Social Workers. This training is designed to support school-based mental health professionals to understand and address the mental health challenges of students who have experienced foster care, adoption and kinship care, as well as provides strategies to support teachers to create a more healing environment in their classroom for students who are struggling.
- **Sharing easy-to-use resources with their children's teachers and administrators** such as [Ask About Adoption: What Teachers Should Know About Adoption](#). This tip sheet from the Quality Improvement Center on Adoption and Guardianship Support is designed to provide a basic understanding of adoption. Sharing the C.A.S.E. tip sheets on what children understand about adoption by age can also be of help to teachers.

For staff who are more interested, parents can also share books on adoption, including *Real Parents, Real Children* by Holly van Gulden; *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens* by Debbie Riley; and *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self* by David Brodzinsky, Marshall Schechter, and Robin Henig.

- **Work with the school as needed to address any challenges that might arise because of the child's past experiences.** Parents often must take the lead to arrange for tutoring, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), section 504 plans, or other supports to help children who are struggling in school. (See IEPs and 504 Plans: A Guide for Parents at <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/developmental-disabilities/Pages/Individualized-Education-Program.aspx> for more information.
- **Form 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.
- **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. They can help children understand that all members of the adoption circle are beginning to speak up to

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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). See the C.A.S.E. topical brief on Helping Adopted Children Respond to Questions.

- **Meet with teachers and administrators.** Orientations and back-to-school nights can be great opportunities for parents to talk with school staff about adoption generally and about anything specific that might affect their child at school. Parents should consult with their children, as developmentally appropriate, about what they want to share, and should ensure that teachers understand that it's up to the child to share their story with anyone else. It can be helpful to remind teachers not to single the child out during any discussions about adoption and to let the child take the lead in what they choose to tell others. If necessary, parents should share information about the impact of trauma on children and the importance of trauma-responsive schools.
- **Make sure children know that they can get help.** As part of ongoing discussions about adoption, parents should make it clear to their children that they are there for support if challenges arise or other children or staff are asking questions or saying things about adoption that make the child feel uncomfortable. Parents can also help their children practice asking for help from teachers or other school staff in the moment.

RESOURCES

- [School Based Mental Health Professionals Training](#)
- [W.I.S.E Up! Powerbook](#) —This workbook for children is 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?”
- [Child Welfare Information Gateway’s adoption and schools resources](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s school resources](#)
- C.A.S.E. blog posts and articles on schools
 - [Enhancing Parent Collaboration with School Around Adoption](#)
 - [Back to School: The Importance of Adoption Competency in Schools Settings](#)
 - [Back to School: What Parents and Educators Should Keep in Mind](#)