
Training for Child Welfare Professionals

The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals provides the foundational knowledge, values and skills needed to enhance adoption competency for child welfare professionals supporting children, youth and families experiencing adoption guardianship, foster, or kinship care. Core competencies include understanding and addressing the complex and often nuanced mental health needs of children, with a focus on the impact of grief and loss, trauma, attachment, identity challenges, and the need for connection and belonging.

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: Introduction and Overview of 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

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
- Identify the core knowledge, values, and skills that characterize an adoption-competent Child Welfare Professional
- Recognize the elevated risk for an array of mental health disorders in children who are in or have exited foster care to adoption or guardianship
- Achieve a beginning recognition of the critical role that Child Welfare Professionals can play to address core mental health issues through effective casework practices

- Identify and integrate into your practice the guiding principles that inform adoption competent interventions to 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

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 the Mental Health Needs of Children and Youth Moving Towards or Having Achieved Permanence Through Adoption and Guardianship
- Lesson 2:** Mental Health Assessment and Treatment Planning Through the Lens of Adoption and Guardianship
- Lesson 3:** Helping Children and Youth Create Their Life Narrative
- Lesson 4:** Working with Parents to Address Children’s Mental Health Needs
- Lesson 5:** Child Welfare Role with Community Mental Health Providers

Learning Objectives

- Define the normative behaviors of children and youth in or from foster care in the context of their unique experiences and current functioning
- Understand how risk and protective factors increase children and youth’s vulnerability and resilience
- Expand your understanding of the unique assessment components for children and youth in care
- Recognize limitations of current diagnostic assessment and medication practices when used with children with foster care experiences
- Identify additional domains to assessment practice
- Understand that practices deemed evidence-based may not, by themselves, address the range of challenges of children within this population
- Identify and describe key features of specific interventions that have been demonstrated to be effective in addressing the effects of early trauma and promoting attachment
- Develop an understanding of the child’s unique story and how that informs your work

- Foster skills that facilitate rapport, conversation, and openness with children and youth about their past experiences
- Identify and describe specific techniques that help children and youth know more about their stories to work through their past experiences and form healthy relationships
- Develop skills to help parents assess their own parenting capabilities, motivation, and readiness to parent their child
- Identify and describe strategies to assist parents and other caregivers to reframe behaviors based on an understanding of the child’s or youth’s story
- Identify and develop strategies to engage parents in using therapeutic parenting to promote healing
- Identify and describe strategies for effective collaboration with mental health professionals, including strategies for:
 - ✓ Identifying a qualified and competent mental health professional
 - ✓ Providing a salient history when making referrals
 - ✓ Clarifying appropriate treatment expectations, and
 - ✓ Assuring that parents are involved in 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:** Attachment and Separation – Their Impact on the Development of Children
- Lesson 2:** Supporting Attachment After Children’s and Youth’s Separation from Birth Family
- Lesson 3:** Child Welfare Role in Working with Children to Support Healthy Attachment
- Lesson 4:** Child Welfare Role in Working with Parents to Enhance Attachment
- Lesson 5:** 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 or youth’s

- ability to form secure attachments
- Understand the critical need to support and comfort children and youth through necessary moves from first placement to permanent adoptive or guardianship family and help them maintain positive attachment relationships
- Understand that secure attachments can be built and re-built
- Define four primary goals in doing attachment casework with children and youth
- Identify and describe child welfare practice strategies and tools to minimize the relational trauma of interrupted attachments and to promote children's and youth's healthy attachments in new families
- Identify the four primary goals in attachment work with foster, adoptive, and guardian parents
- Identify and describe strategies and tools to:
 - ✓ Help families 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
- Demonstrate your ability to make appropriate referrals, monitor treatment progress and outcomes, and collaborate effectively with mental health professionals.

Module 4: Exploring How Family and Relational Influences Impact Child Well-being

In Module 4, participants will learn how structural influences 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 families, including single parent, children with special needs and kinship caregivers; understanding the development of identity and self-perception and using skills to have conversations to promote belonging and connection; strategies for supporting each person's sense of self.

- Lesson 1:** Understanding the Structural Influences on Adoption and Guardianship
- Lesson 2:** Understanding the Mental Health Needs of Different Types of Adoptive and Guardianship Families
- Lesson 3:** Promoting a Sense of Belonging for Children and Youth
- Lesson 4:** Working with Parents to Promote their Child's Sense of Belonging
- Lesson 5:** Child Welfare Professional's Role in Supporting Each Person's Identity and Sense of Self

Learning Objectives

- Recognize structural influences that impact children and families psychologically and socially.
- Develop greater awareness of the one's assumptions
- Recognize the effects of structural influences on the mental health of children and youth
- Increase your understanding of the complexities of adoption and guardianship in different types of families

- Identify the strengths and challenges of different types of families and their implications for the mental health of children and youth
- Develop specific strategies to promote belonging and connection
- Identify and employ child welfare practices and tools for helping families to value and honor their children’s heritage
- Facilitate parent’s understanding of how to promote their child’s belonging and connection
- Identify and describe the implications of when children and youth move from poverty to plenty, and strategies that support successful adoption and guardianship
- Identify and describe strategies and considerations for promoting one’s identity and sense of self.

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 and Grief on Emotional Adjustments and Mental Health of Children and Families
- Lesson 2:** Understanding Loss and Grief Issues in the Context of Developmental Stages, Emotional Adjustments, and Mental Health of Children and Youth
- Lesson 3:** Child Welfare Professional’s Role in Helping Children and Youth Deal with Loss and Grief
- Lesson 4:** Child Welfare Professional’s Role in Helping Parents and Guardians Support their Child’s Grief
- Lesson 5:** Maintaining Connections and Openness and the Child Welfare Role with Community-Based Mental Health Providers in Helping Children Deal with Grief and Loss

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
- Describe how grief and loss manifests developmentally, behaviorally, and in emotional expression
- Assess more accurately children’s and youth’s behavior, distinguishing manifestations of unresolved grief from pathology
- Employ casework practices and tools with children and youth that facilitate conversations about grief and loss in a sensitive, empathic, and timely way
- Employ casework practices and tools to facilitate the grieving process, building readiness for

new relationships

- Articulate the Child Welfare Professional’s role in preparing, educating, and supporting parents to assist their children in their grieving
- Employ casework practices with parents and guardians to help them understand and support the grief process and build readiness for new relationships
- Understand the unique dynamics and challenges of the relative caregiving parent
- Identify and describe how openness in adoption and guardianship, and maintaining connections, can ameliorate loss and grief
- Assess an appropriate level of openness in a child’s or youth’s best interest
- Collaborate with mental health providers to assure that they understand the issues of loss and grief for children and youth in adoption and guardianship, the unique clinical issues in relative care, and the clinical issues pertaining to openness

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 or Guardianship

Lesson 2: Understanding the Psychological Impact of Trauma and How Children and Youth Cope

Lesson 3: The Child Welfare Professional’s Role in Working with Children and Youth to Identify and Address the Impact of Trauma

Lesson 4: Child Welfare Professional’s Role in Working with Parents to Address the Impact of Trauma

Lesson 5: Child Welfare Professional’s Role in Supporting Mental Health Treatment

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”
- Identify four frameworks for understanding trauma and trauma-related behaviors in children and youth
- Reduce system-related trauma for children and youth

- Employ casework practices and tools with children and youth to build resilience and facilitate healing from trauma
- Employ casework practices and tools to build resilience and facilitate healing from trauma.
- Articulate important goals to address with parents to enhance the child’s “felt safety”
- Identify and describe the most common and effective practice models for trauma
- Articulate strategies for supporting treatment for children and youth in their families
- 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 and history 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: Identity Matters
- Lesson 2:** Identity Formation During the Adolescent Years for Youth Moving Towards or Having Achieved Permanence Through Adoption and Guardianship
- Lesson 3:** Child Welfare Professional’s Role with Children, Youth, and Birth Families in Supporting Positive Identity
- Lesson 4:** Child Welfare Professional’s Role with Parents in Helping Children and Youth with Positive Identity Formation
- Lesson 5:** Search and Reunion and Collaboration with Community-Based Mental Health Providers

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the importance of self-identity, how it is formed, and its relationship to mental health
- Articulate the different stages of identity development and focus on adolescence as the pivotal time for clarifying identity
- 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 help youth to integrate the various aspects of the birth family history into their sense of self
- Identify tools to help youth gather and process information about birth family history
- Employ casework strategies and tools to help parents support their children’s positive identity formation including addressing the Six Stuck Spots
- 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

- Describe the role search and reunion play in the identity formation of the youth and honor the need for knowledge about their birth family and adoption story
- 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:** Child, Youth, and Family Adjustment after Adoption or Guardianship
- Lesson 2:** The Mental Health Challenges of Children, Youth, and Families After Adoption or Guardianship
- Lesson 3:** Matching Child, Youth, and Family Needs to Postadoption and Guardianship Services
- Lesson 4:** Maintaining Stability Post-Permanency - The Ongoing Journey
- 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
- 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
- Recognize your role in supporting the provision of postadoption services

Supervisor Lessons

Each module includes a short additional lesson for Supervisors (a total of 3 hours) that identifies three key skills from that module that supervisors can help support staff to use in their daily

casework practice. Lessons include brief discussion about challenges or barriers to using these skills and how supervisors can address them, potential conversation starters to use with staff, one or more video roleplays demonstrating discussions between supervisors and staff to help build or strengthen staff skills or address challenges staff may encounter in using the skills, as well as a summary of tools from the training that can be used. A downloadable ***Supervisor Coaching and Activity Guide*** also provides supervisors with a variety of activities relating to the three key skill areas identified for each module that supervisors can choose to use with their teams or staff individually. Examples of activities include:

- **Team discussion or self-assessments 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 origins? 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.
- **Application 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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