
Training for Mental Health Professionals

Revised December 2025

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

In addition to sharing clinical best practices in assessment and treatment and therapeutic parenting strategies, NTI provides an overview of evidence-based and evidence-informed treatment models that have been shown to be effective in helping children and youth heal from trauma and strengthen attachments.

Module 1: A Case for Adoption Competency

This module provides an overview of the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals and makes the case for the need for adoption competency in working with children, youth, and families experiencing adoption or guardianship. Lessons in this module orient participants to the training; 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 practice today; emphasize the urgent need for permanency for children; and introduce salient clinical issues for children and youth and their families experiencing adoption or guardianship from foster care, private infant adoption, or inter-country adoption.

Lesson 1: Course Overview and The Need for Adoption Competency (30 min.)

Lesson 2: The Language of Adoption (10)

Lesson 3: Guiding Principles That Support Effective Mental Health Practice with Children and Families (30)

Lesson 4: Achieving and Maintaining Permanence Is Key to Well-Being and Mental Health (20)

Lesson 5: Pathways to Adoption and Guardianship Today (20)

Lesson 6: Core Clinical Issues in Adoption and their Link to Mental Health (35)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Acquire appropriate expectations for this course based on an accurate understanding of the focus, nature, and main goals of the training. L1

- Identify core knowledge, values, and skills that characterize an adoption competent mental health professional. L1
- Recognize the importance of using positive adoption language. L2
- Identify and integrate into your practice the guiding principles that inform adoption competent clinical interventions to address the unique mental health needs of children, youth, and their families. L3
- To understand the negative impact of impermanence on mental health and adjustment in adoptive and guardianship families. L4
- To integrate this understanding into the foundation of your practice with children, youth, and families. L4
- Describe the pathways to adoption and guardianship and how practice has changed over time. L5
- Identify common myths about adoption and describe the accurate information associated with each myth. L5
- The objective for this lesson is to identify salient clinical issues associated with the various adoption and guardianship options. L6

Module 2: Understanding and Addressing the Complex Mental Health Needs of Children & Youth in Adoptive and Guardianship Families

This module 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; limitations of current diagnostic and medication practices commonly used with children with foster and/or institutional care experiences; skills and techniques for helping children/youth make sense of their adoption/guardianship stories; challenges related to developmental stages of the adoptive family life cycle; goals for therapeutic work and strategies for engaging families; and how to collaborate effectively with child welfare and other professionals to support appropriate treatment planning and intervention.

Lesson 1: The Big Picture: Understanding the Factors that Shape Children’s Adjustment (40)

Lesson 2: Understanding the Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on Mental Health (35)

Lesson 3: Tools and Techniques for Helping Children Integrate Their Life Stories (35)

Lesson 4: Family Life is Paramount in Healing (40)

Lesson 5: Issues in Diagnosis and Treatment of Adopted Children’s Mental Health Needs (45)

Learning Objectives. *Upon completion of this module, the trainee will*

- Identify and understand the risk and protective factors for children and families through the lens of adoption and guardianship. L1
- Integrate the impact of risk and protective factors through the exploration of case examples. L1
- Understand how early life experiences and risk and protective factors impact a child's or youth's mental health and well-being. L2
- Conduct assessment through the lens of adoption, foster and kinship care. L2
- Recognize the importance of knowing children’s unique and complete story and the negative impacts of missing or misinformation and secrets. L3
- Help children and youth construct a coherent life narrative that makes sense of their experiences and supports a positive identity. L3

- Identify and describe the developmental stages and challenges of the adopted individual's and adoptive family's life cycle. L4
- Recognize the need for family systems work, with parents as primary agents of healing and the experts on their child. L4
- Identify and describe goals for family work and strategies for engaging families. L4
- Identify and describe the core mental health issues that are addressed in adoption competent clinical interventions with children, youth, and their adoptive and guardianship families. L5
- Recognize limitations of current diagnostic assessment and medication practices commonly used with children and youth with foster and/or institutional care experiences. L5
- Identify and describe strategies for effective collaboration with child welfare and other professionals that promote information sharing, appropriate treatment planning and intervention, and parental involvement in the therapeutic process. L5

Module 3: Attachment, Child Development, and Mental Health - Promoting Security in Adoptive and Guardianship Families

This module focuses on understanding the impact of early insecure attachment, poor nurture, separation, and abrupt moves on attachment and supporting the process of rebuilding or strengthening attachments. Lessons focus on understanding the continuum of attachment styles and challenges and the importance of accurate diagnosis of attachment disorders; provide tools for assessing attachment in children and parents and common goals for reparative work in your clinical practice; review behaviors associated with child and parent attachment styles and implications for clinical intervention; highlight therapeutic tasks for children and parents to promote attachment and bonding and integrate therapeutic parenting strategies to enhance children's safety and attachment; and discuss evidence-based/evidence-informed attachment-based therapies to address attachment challenges and create a healing environment that facilitates attachment. Additional models discussed include Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-Up; Attachment, Regulation, and Self-Competency; Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy; Trust-Based Relational Intervention, and Theraplay among others.

Lesson 1: Understanding Attachment as the Foundation for Child Development (45)

Lesson 2: The Implications of Attachment Challenges in Treatment (45)

Lesson 3: Assessing and Addressing Attachment Challenges in Children and Parents (30)

Lesson 4: Practice Models to Address Complex Attachment Challenges (35)

Lesson 5: Practice Models for Enhancing Parent-Child Attachment (35)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Comprehend attachment and recognize its critical importance for children's development. L1
- Synthesize an understanding of attachment patterns and challenges in your work with families and the importance of appropriate diagnosis of attachment disorders. L1
- Assess the impact of early insecure attachment on brain structure and social, emotional, verbal, and cognitive development. L2
- Integrate common treatment goals for reparative work in your clinical practice with children, youth, and families. L2
- Describe the process of early attachment formation and behaviors associated with child and parent attachment styles. L3

- Integrate adoption competent clinical practices to assess attachment history. L3
- Integrate into clinical practice strategies and therapeutic tools for helping families understand and honor their children's previous attachments and unique story. L4
- Integrate into clinical practice strategies and therapeutic tools for helping families address attachment challenges, create a healing environment that facilitates attachment, and employs therapeutic parenting strategies that enhance children's safety and attachment. L4
- Identify clinical practices associated with attachment that are not effective and could even be potentially harmful. L4
- Identify and describe strategies and therapeutic tools for helping families understand and honor their children's and youth's previous attachments and unique story. L5
- Integrate therapeutic parenting strategies that enhance children's and youth's attachment. L5

Module 4: The Impact of Loss and Grief Experiences on Children's & Youth's Mental Health

This module focuses on the central role of loss and grief in foster care, adoption, or guardianship and how ambiguous and unresolved loss, abandonment, rejection, and disenfranchised grief impact the mental health of children. Lessons will emphasize the different kinds of loss and grief, and children's developmental understanding of loss; focus on how loss and grief manifests developmentally, behaviorally, and emotionally; review therapeutic strategies and tools for helping children grieve and heal; provide strategies and evidence-informed therapies to help professionals and parents support grieving children; identify special issues in relative caregiving; and highlight the importance of, and provide strategies for, supporting openness and maintaining family, community, and cultural connections to mitigate losses.

Lesson 1: The Impact of Ambiguous Loss and Unresolved Grief on Emotional Adjustment (50)

Lesson 2: Understanding Loss and Grief Issues in Adoption (35)

Lesson 3: Understanding the Stages of Grief in Adoption (35)

Lesson 4: Impact of Abandonment and Rejection on Children's and Youth's Mental Health (50)

Lesson 5: Preparing and Helping Parents to Support Their Child's Grief (50)

Lesson 6: Maintaining Connections and Openness (45)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- To identify and describe principles and key features of grief models and the mental health impacts and behaviors associated with ambiguous loss and unresolved grief. L1
- Describe the child's developmental understanding of loss in adoption. L2
- Describe the stages of grief for a child and common behaviors associated with those losses. L2
- Integrate two loss and grief models that support grief work in your clinical practice. L3
- Identify the impact of abandonment and rejection on mental health, how it presents clinically, how to support children through separation, and implications for therapeutic intervention. L4
- Describe the nature and therapeutic value of life books, loss boxes, journaling, bibliotherapy, and other tools that facilitate reflection about losses and the grieving process and build readiness for new relationships. L4
- Identify and describe therapeutic strategies that help caregivers become aware of their own losses, understand their child's behaviors within the context of their loss and grief history, employ rituals and experiences that help children and youth put a voice to their loss, and identify special issues in relative caregiving, adoption, and guardianship. L5

- Recognize the therapeutic value of openness. L6
- Describe the importance of past connections in mitigating loss and grief. L6

Module 5: Addressing the Impact of Trauma on Child Development and Mental Health

This module focuses on the impact of trauma, including trauma from separation, on brain development, behavior, and mental health of children experiencing adoption or guardianship, as well as the implications for therapeutic interventions. Lessons focus on diagnostic limitations and tools to assess trauma history and its impact on functioning; the importance of helping parents shift thinking from “what’s wrong with you” to “what happened to you,” and strategies to support parents providing the healing environment and managing trauma triggers for their child; strategies and evidence-based/evidence-informed interventions to establish felt safety, build coping and regulatory skills, and readiness for children to process emotions related to traumatic experiences; and the impact of, and strategies to address, secondary trauma for parents and professionals. Several evidence-based interventions are shared, including Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics, Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, and Child Parent Psychotherapy.

Lesson 1: Traumatic Experiences of Children Achieving Permanency (60)

Lesson 2: Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Children’s Mental Health (30)

Lesson 3: Assessing Trauma Exposure and Its Impact on Children (45)

Lesson 4: Treatment Goals for Remediating the Impact of Trauma (45)

Lesson 5: Models for Addressing Complex Trauma (50)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Identify and describe types of trauma and implications for therapeutic intervention with each. L1
- Describe the impact of trauma and early and ongoing adverse experiences on brain development, behavior, and identity formation. L1, L2
- Identify relevant diagnoses associated with trauma and the diagnostic limitations. L2
- Describe adoption competent clinical assessment practices and tools to assess trauma history and its impact on functioning to assure appropriate diagnosis. L3
- Identify and describe therapeutic strategies and interventions with children that establish feelings of emotional safety, build coping and regulatory skills, and readiness to process emotions related to traumatic experiences. L4
- Integrate into your clinical practice therapeutic strategies that assist parents to provide the healing environment for their children to begin development of coping and self-regulation strategies. L4
- Synthesize therapeutic interventions in your clinical practice that establish safety and readiness to help children process emotions, build coping and regulatory skills with children and youth, assist parents to provide structure and routines, experiences that nurture and heal, and support the development of coping and self-regulation strategies. L5

Module 6: Identity Formation and the Impact of Adoption and Guardianship

This module focuses on the nature of identity formation in the context of adoption and guardianship and the impact of missing and inaccurate information, and the implications of integration of one’s adoption story. Lessons focus on understanding identity formation; barriers

to positive identity; strategies to address the “Six Stuck Spots;” and the role of openness in positive identity formation. Also included are 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 influence of significant others in the lives of their children; the role of search and reunion in identity formation; and the importance of parental support in the search and reunion process.

Lesson 1: Overview: Identity Matters (30)

Lesson 2: Identity Formation During the Adolescent Years (35)

Lesson 3: Therapist’s Role in Working with the Child or Youth to Support Positive Identity Formation (25)

Lesson 4: Helping Parents Support Positive Identity Formation (30)

Lesson 5: Special Considerations in Supporting Transracial Families (45)

Lesson 6: Mental Health Professional’s Role in Supporting Youth Search and Reunion (50)

Lesson 7: The Impact of Changing Social or Economic Status in Placements (15)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Identify and describe how our identity is shaped, and the impact of adoption, guardianship, foster care and kinship care on identity formation. L1
- Understand adolescence as the pivotal time for clarifying identity. L1
- Integrate identity work in your clinical practice with adoptive youth and families. L1
- Recognize adolescence as a pivotal time in identity formation and understand the importance of helping the youth integrate their story. L2
- Identify and describe the nature of “stuck spots” in identity formation experienced by adopted children and youth, related developmental tasks, and therapeutic interventions recognized as effective. L2
- Identify, and integrate clinical practices to assist youth in exploring dimensions of their identity and integrating their life story. L3
- Integrate into your clinical practice strategies to help youth manage difficult or intrusive questions or comments about their adoption story. L3
- Identify and describe therapeutic interventions appropriate to assist parents to understand the identity formation process, support identity exploration, and share difficult information. L4
- Build skills to enhance parental capacity to parent children of various communities or identities. L5
- Integrate into your clinical practice therapeutic strategies for assisting parents to initiate conversations with their children to support the integration of identities. L5
- Describe the clinical implications of current search and reunion practices. L6
- Integrate into your clinical practice adoption competent strategies appropriate to assist parents to understand the identity formation process in connection with search and reunion, and the importance of parental support. L6
- Discuss the implication of change in economic circumstances for children. L7
- Gain skills in assessing and responding to the impact of change in status for children. L7

Module 7: Assessment and Treatment Planning

This module will integrate and apply the information learned from previous modules to the assessment and treatment planning process, with focus on the overlay of adoption and

guardianship-related issues and questions that should be incorporated to assure that clinical work is provided with an “adoption lens.” Lessons will also focus on how to formulate treatment plans that support more secure attachment, resolution of grief, and promotion of self-regulation; the integral role of parents in therapeutic work; and special assessment issues of relative caregivers.

Lesson 1: Assessment Through the Adoption/Guardianship Lens (40)

Lesson 2: Unique Assessment Issues when Working with Relative Caregivers (45)

Lesson 3: Clinical Considerations for Working with Native American Families (30)

Lesson 4: Utilizing the Assessment in Goal Setting and Treatment Planning (45)

Learning Objective. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Understand and integrate an adoption competent assessment protocol into your clinical practice. L1
- Determine applicability of standardized assessment tools in working with adoption and guardianship families. L1
- Recognize issues in assessment unique to relative care providers. Let’s update the title to remove “across different populations” L2
- Synthesize your understanding of these issues into your clinical practice. L2
- Explore key clinical considerations for mental health professionals working with Native American families. L3
- Formulate treatment plans that support secure attachments, resolution of grief and loss, self-regulation skills, and positive identity formation within a healing family environment. L4
- Recognize the family as the core client and demonstrate a commitment to family systems work. L4
- Understand the treatment implications regarding Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder for this population. L4

Module 8: Using Therapeutic Parenting Strategies to Address Children’s Challenging Behavior

This module focuses on the nature of challenges and concerning behaviors commonly seen in adoptive and guardianship families and the therapeutic parenting strategies that professionals can teach and support parents to use. Lessons focus on supporting parents to promote attunement and felt safety with children; understand and reframe behaviors; develop realistic expectations; provide a balance of nurture and structure; and teach self-regulation and coping skills. The lesson also addresses challenging behaviors that are often the most problematic for parents and threaten adoption stability. Strategies are based on ARC, TBRI, Circle of Security, and Collaborative Problem-Solving models

Lesson 1: Laying the Foundation for Change (40)

Lesson 2: Bolstering Therapeutic Strategies for Parents (45)

Lesson 3: Teaching Self-Regulation Skills through Therapeutic Parenting (30)

Lesson 4: Managing Behaviors that Contribute to Adoption Instability (45)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Describe the therapeutic strategies for helping parents develop realistic expectations and support the use of psychoeducation. L1

- Help parents develop a healthy environment for their child and establish parents as the primary agents of healing and safety. L1
- Identify and describe specific therapeutic strategies to assist parents to develop nurturing, trusting relationships with children who have attachment and behavioral challenges; provide a healthy balance of nurture and structure in the parent-child interaction; and support the development of the child's capacity for self-regulation and healthy coping. L2
- Identify and describe specific therapeutic strategies to assist parents to build awareness of and improve their own regulation skills, provide a healthy balance of nurture and structure in the parent-child interaction; and support the development of the child's capacity for self-regulation and healthy coping. L3
- Identify and describe challenging behaviors that lead to adoption instability. L4
- Integrate into your clinical practice specific therapeutic strategies with parents and youth to manage challenging behaviors. L4

Module 9: Family Stability and Wellness Post Permanency

This module looks at adoption as a life-long process including the factors that shape adoption or guardianship adjustment and either support or threaten children's and the family's ongoing safety, permanency, and well-being. Lessons will explore the needs of children and families after adoption or guardianship and the continuum of post-adoption/guardianship services that help to prevent adoption disruption or dissolution. Additionally, this module covers the importance of positive adoption language, as well as provides clinicians with the opportunity to reflect on the impact of this training on their clinical practice.

Lesson 1: Matching Child and Family Needs After Permanency with Effective Services (35)

Lesson 2: Post-Adoption Therapeutic Services: Working with Families (50)

Lesson 3: The Impact of NTI Training on Your Clinical Practice (25)

Learning Objectives. Upon completion of this module, the trainee will

- Recognize adoption as a life-long process, with ongoing elevated mental health needs often years after placement. L1
- Identify and describe the continuum of post-adoption mental health needs and the services that help to sustain families and promote stability. L1
- Understand the different types of adoption instability and contributing factors present. L1
- Identify key characteristics of post-adoption work across the life cycle. L2
- Assess the need to collaborate and advocate with multiple systems to support family stability and child well-being. L2
- Engage relevant professionals and systems in addressing child and family needs. L2
- Identify and describe practice change behaviors to incorporate in your clinical practice as an adoption competent mental health professional.