



C.A.S.E.

The Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc.

Providing Specialized Services for Adoptive Families and the Community

What The Classroom Teacher Can Do To Support Adopted Children And Teens

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Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc.

The most important thing that you can do to help adopted children is to understand how critical your role is in helping ALL children understand and accept adoption as a normal, positive way to build families. If you do not have any adopted children in your classroom, you still have tremendous opportunities to improve children's knowledge and comfort level with adoption.

"I want it to be O.K. to be adopted at school," is the way one child voiced one of the most pressing concerns of adopted children. You and your colleagues can create that environment if you can communicate your support for adoption as a way to build families and if you feel comfortable when adoption topics come up in the class. It is important to be aware of the unique, but normal, challenges of adopted children so that you can create a safe, understanding place for them. We believe that parents and educators can maximize opportunities for children's success in school by working collaboratively when adoption issues are present.

There are 5 ways that teachers can help ALL children grow and learn in schools that are free of prejudice and misunderstanding about adoption.

1. ACCEPTANCE

You can SET THE TONE FOR ACCEPTANCE OF ADOPTION AS A VALID WAY TO BUILD FAMILIES.

Calm, thoughtful comments or responses to questions about adoption send the message that you feel adoption is a normal way to bring families together and that children should feel comfortable with it, too. This is probably the most important thing that you can do for adopted children because your attitude toward adoption will go a long way toward helping children accept it.

In addition, you are in a position to direct children's natural curiosity about the why and how of adoption away from the personal stories of adoptees in your school. By answering questions in a general way, children learn not to intrude on the privacy of their fellow students. Your confidence in giving information helps children understand adoptive families, while it models how adoption is most appropriately discussed without attention to individual circumstances.



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Examples:

Child: "Ms. X, did you know that Melissa is adopted from Korea?"

Teacher: "Yes, I did. Isn't that great?"

Child: "How come Joey is adopted? Where's his REAL mother?"

Teacher: "Joey has a real mother! She was here yesterday to pick him up after school. Sometimes children need families because the mothers who gave birth to them could not take care of them. That's a sad time for the mothers, but luckily, there are people who can help them find forever families for their babies. That is called adoption."

Child: "Is that what happened to Joey?"

Teacher: "Joey's adoption story is private – it is his story to tell. What's important is that he has a mom, dad, and 2 sisters!"

2. ACCURACY

You can PROVIDE ACCURATE INFORMATION ABOUT ADOPTION at the appropriate time and in an interesting way so children will learn about it. We encourage teachers to look for opportunities in their daily lessons.

a) Opportunities in your curriculum

Adoption can be discussed in a matter-of-fact way during lessons about:

- Multicultural, blended, or "different" families
- Genetics or inherited characteristics
- Recent immigration to the U.S.
- Certain history lessons
- Literature which includes adoption or foster care as part of the story. (A list of these books is available through C.A.S.E.)

b) Special opportunities that you can develop

(C.A.S.E. can provide information about these examples.)

- Observation of National Adoption Month (November) by highlighting successful adoptees, by giving a short presentation about adoption and the many positive points about it, or, with permission, highlighting an adoptive family in your school. Invite an adoptive parent or adult adoptee to talk to your class.
- Point out how some well-known people have connections to adoption, including adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents.
- Celebrate an adoptive family, highlighting special cultural connections, family traditions, or events.
- Teach a lesson about adoption with available materials.



c) Unexpected opportunities

Adoption may come up when you don't expect it to, but don't be afraid to respond. Send the message that it is O.K. to talk about adoption. Here are a few rules of thumb:

- If it is too personal, move it to generalized information about adoption.
- If you can't answer the question, don't make it up! Tell children you will find out and get back to them. Let them know there are resources and books about adoption.
- Keep things balanced, informational, and positive, and help children to understand the whole picture, particularly if they are fixated on one aspect of adoption.

3. ASSIGNMENTS

You can BE SENSITIVE TO SCHOOL LESSONS WHICH MIGHT BE DIFFICULT FOR ADOPTED CHILDREN.

There are some common curricula which challenge adoptees because they exaggerate the difference in their background, reveal private information, or highlight missing information. Some of these are particularly hurtful for children who experienced foster care or were adopted at an older age.

- Family trees
- Autobiographies
- Student of the Week
- Family holidays
- Inherited characteristics
- Mother's Day/Father's Day
- Timelines
- Baby pictures
- Birth data
- Medical history
- Sex education
- Family heritage and history

The best way to handle these kinds of assignments is to broaden them so that ALL children have some choices as they complete them. Keep in mind your goals in making the assignment and different ways to reach those goals, rather than emphasizing that everyone's product be the same.



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Examples:

Autobiographies: Rather than ask for full disclosure of life events, ask all children to choose their 3 favorite or most eventful years, or allow them to include a minimum of 2 years in their autobiography and eliminate the rest.

Family trees: Many schools have stopped this activity because of the increasing complexities of family life. At C.A.S.E. we think it can be a wonderful task if the class is encouraged to make a forest of different trees, emphasizing how families can look different but have many similarities. It's important that you allow for multiple branches, including important people, such as aunts and uncles, babysitters, grandparents, and birth parents.

Mother's Day: Children with more than one mother may have many ways of interpreting something as simple as a Mother's Day card. It is important to understand that children may have contact with birth mothers, and even if they do not, they may want to make cards and remember her on Mother's Day. (This also applies to Father's Day.)

Student of the Week: The practice of highlighting one child for a day or week is designed to be a self-esteem builder. However, it can backfire for children who were adopted because it frequently results in pointing out the differences in his/her family which are hard to explain to classmates. Adoptees may lack photos and family memories. We suggest that you talk with the child's parents in advance, and be prepared for how you can step in to assist with questions and comments that may arise (see #5 below).

As children move into middle school or junior high, it's easy for many teachers to forget about the impact of adoption. However, the teen years can be some of the most challenging for adoptees. As they develop individual identities, their adoption stories become even more important for many of them. They may struggle with internal questions about which set of parents (adoptive or birth) they are truly like, and that extra layer of challenge can be difficult.

School assignments which address genetics, inherited characteristics, human development, sexual responsibility, or family heritage can be upsetting for young teens who do not want to stand out from their peers.



4. ASSISTANCE

You can ASSIST ADOPTED CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ADOPTION.

There may be times when children are asked personal questions about adoption which they cannot handle on their own. If you become aware that this is occurring, we encourage you to step in and support the adopted child, just as you would if you overheard intrusive questions regarding divorce, family culture, or race.

Examples:

Child to Adoptee: "What happened to your first mom? Didn't she want you?"
Teacher: "That is not really your business, Tom. I have friends who were adopted and they don't always like to talk about their birth mothers because it's their personal story. So if (adoptee) does not want to share that information, that's fine."

Sarah to Adoptee: "How did you get adopted? Were you in an orphanage?"
Emma: "I was in a foster family. My mother did drugs and..."
Teacher: "You know, Sarah, adoption is a great way to build a family. But children who were adopted don't always like to talk about their adoption stories. It's completely up to them. How about you, Emma?"

5. ADVOCACY

BE PREPARED TO ADVOCATE FOR ADOPTED CHILDREN IF THE SITUATION REQUIRES IT.

Most adopted children will expect to handle negative comments on their own. We encourage you to develop a school policy which lets all adoptive parents and children know that they can go to the principal, counselor, or teacher to get help with comments or questions which upset them. An attack on a child's family goes to the core of their being and even the strongest child may need assistance at certain times. We encourage you to:

- STOP taunting, invasive questions.
- Determine how best to handle situations (individually, with small group, as class lesson, involving parents, etc.).
- Place support clearly behind adoption as a valid family form. This does not require that you approve of the way an adopted child has handled the situation.