

Preparing Adoptive Parents

Adopting a child from foster care is a life-changing and complex experience for both the child and adoptive parents, and achieving a successful adoption requires parents to lay a strong foundation on which to welcome a child into their family. Caseworkers can support families in this process by being upfront with them about what they might expect regarding bonding with the child, parenting a child who has experienced loss and grief, how parents and children may emotionally process the adoption, the supports available to both the child and parents, and other important topics. This bulletin provides caseworkers with information and resources about the importance of preparing adoptive parents as well as how they can help prepare them for this journey. Information in this bulletin also may be pertinent for working with families formed through other types of permanency, such as guardianship.

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For information about working with children and youth being adopted from foster care, refer to Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-preparingchildren/>.

IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Prepermanency services can help ensure families are adequately equipped to overcome any challenges that may arise during the placement process and after the placement is final, particularly when they are paired later with applicable postadoption services. Properly preparing parents for adoption can improve outcomes for all members of the family and increase the stability of the placement (Lee, Kobulsky, Brodzinsky, & Barth, 2018). Some parents, however, feel ill prepared for their adoptions, which may be attributed to having unrealistic expectations or inadequate communication with the child welfare agency (Barnett et al., 2018). One study of adoptive parents found the following factors to be important to parents as they prepared for their placements (Lee et al., 2018):

- Information and services regarding special needs
- Access to adoption specialty services
- Learning about parenting tools and skills rather than just receiving general information
- Attending to their own emotional needs
- Connections with other adoptive and birth parents

Even if the parents already know or have cared for the child they plan to adopt, such as in the case of the child's relatives or foster family, they still need additional preparation. While some steps in the preparation process may not be necessary, adoption is still an adjustment that requires some level of preparation for all persons involved. Caseworkers should review the family's and child's needs and situations to determine what types of preparation are essential.

For additional information about the importance of adoption preparation and support, as well as an assessment to help determine your agency's readiness for providing prepermanency services, read the Capacity Building Center for States' *Prepermanency Services for Adoptive and Guardianship Families* at <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/114938.pdf?r=1&rpp=10&upp=0&w=+NATIVE%28%27recn%20%3D114938%27%29&m=1>.

Providing Complete Information and Setting Realistic Expectations

When providing information to prospective adoptive parents about their child and the adoption process, it is critical for caseworkers to be comprehensive and honest and to help parents set realistic expectations (Wynne, 2016; Lee et al., 2018). At a minimum, caseworkers should fully disclose all known information about the child and birth family in writing and through conversations with the adoptive parents. This includes explanations of the child's placement history and a full physical and behavioral health history, including prenatal substance exposure. (For additional information about the effects of prenatal substance exposure as well as available interventions, visit the National Center of Substance Abuse and Child Welfare at <https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/resources/substance-exposed-infants.aspx>.) Caseworkers should share the results of any assessments, if available, that identify the child's strengths and challenges as well as any interventions that may help.

By only providing the "positive" information about a child, you may be leaving parents unprepared to properly care for their child. Parents who do not have realistic expectations of the child and the postadoption period may be at a higher risk for feelings of grief, loss, and isolation (Waid & Alewine, 2018). If a child has exhibited or is likely to exhibit problematic behaviors, such as sexually acting out, aggression, or self-abuse, it is imperative for you to be honest with parents so they will not be surprised if the situation arises (Keck & Gianforte, 2015). Caseworkers should also help parents understand the implications of this information for their parenting. For example, a child may be 12 years old, but, due to his developmental age, may display behaviors of a much younger child and need to be treated as such. Parents will benefit from receiving information about how they can respond to problematic or confusing behaviors, and they may need reassurances to not take these behaviors personally.

To learn more about what information can be shared with adoptive parents in your State, refer to Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Providing Adoptive Parents With Information About Adoptees and Their Birth Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/collection/>.

HOW TO PREPARE ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Reviewing the topics in this section with parents can help them prepare for the addition of their child to the family. Although many of the topics discussed in this bulletin may be covered in preadoption training for parents required or provided by your agency, it is still helpful to go over them with parents to make sure they understand the information or to reinforce the materials presented. To review resources regarding preadoption training, refer to the Capacity Building Center for States at <https://library.childwelfare.gov/cwig/ws/library/docs/capacity/Blob/114938.pdf?r=1&rpp=10&upp=0&w=+NATIVE%28%27recno%3D114938%27%29&m=1> (see p. 4).

CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES, EMOTIONS, AND BEHAVIORS DURING THE PERMANENCY PROCESS

Each child perceives his or her adoption differently, and how the child views the permanency process and how the parent views it may be very different. Explaining the following concerns a child may have when transitioning to a new family can help parents understand the child's perspective:

- **Loss and grief.** Being separated from a parent—temporarily or permanently—can have a profound impact on a child, even if he or she was removed from home as a result of a parent's maltreatment (National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative [NTI], 2019). In addition to the loss of their parents upon removal from the home, children and youth also may experience the loss of other parts of their lives, such as siblings, friends, supportive adults, classmates, pets, familiar surroundings, cultural connections, and more. If they were previously with another foster family, they also may feel grief about leaving that home or rejection that the family did not adopt them. Grief is a normal response to loss. For children experiencing loss, their grief may manifest in various ways, such as anger, sadness, irritability, withdrawal, confusion, distractibility, self-harm, or even excitability (NTI, 2019). It also could contribute to fear of abandonment or lack of trust. Loss and grief can be felt in both the short and long term, and the feelings may change or emerge over time due to changing developmental stages or particular life events (e.g., birthdays, anniversaries of important events).

For additional information about loss and grief, refer to the following:

- Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss [webpage]: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping/>
- Grief and Loss [webpage]: <https://www.nacac.org/help/parenting/grief-and-loss/>
- *Effects of Separation and Loss on Children's Development*: <https://www.fosterclub.com/sites/default/files/Effects%20of%20Separation%20and%20Loss%20on%20Childrens%20Development.pdf>
- **Uncertainty and confusion.** Children may continue to think and worry about their birth or foster families, and they may struggle with their changed role or sibling status. For example, a child may have been the only child in his or her birth family, but the adoptive family may include several children. Children also may be confused if their own feelings about a permanent placement do not match others' expectations of how they should react. For example, adults in the child's life may expect him or her to feel happy or grateful to be joining a new family, but the child may still be grieving the loss of his or her birth or foster family (NTI, 2019). When children are placed with relatives, they may feel uncertain or confused about their new role within the family and about how others' roles may change (e.g., the child's grandmother or aunt may now be acting as the mother figure) (NTI, 2019).

Children—particularly those who have experienced disrupted or dissolved adoptions—also may be unsure of the adoptive parents' commitment and test the parents' boundaries to ensure their commitment is for the long term. Children who are adopted from foster care have been in one or more homes since being removed from their birth family, which could contribute to them not understanding what it means to stay with an adoptive family permanently. Moving to multiple homes could also cause confusion about family rules, expectations, and cultures, as each family has its own dynamic.

- **Anxiety.** Children about to join or who have joined a new family may feel anxious about the transition (Jarema, 2012). Just as they may grieve being separated from people and places familiar to them, they may worry about the changes and different situations they will encounter with their new family, home, or school, including what the new rules and expectations are if the placement will really be permanent.
- **Divided loyalties.** Many children, particularly adolescents, have conflicting feelings about being a permanent member of a new family. They may still have strong emotional ties to parents and siblings and may fantasize about or hold out hope for reconciliation even when legal ties have been terminated.

It is important for parents to acknowledge and respect the emotions the child is experiencing, as minimizing them may result in additional unresolved grief (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Parents also should be aware that these emotions may occur and/or change before, during, and after the adoption is finalized. Additionally, even if children are being adopted by a foster family, relatives, or others with whom they are familiar and comfortable, the finality of the adoption may intensify feelings of loss (DeGarmo, 2017).

ADOPTIVE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ADOPTION PROCESS

Adoptive parents may be facing their own emotions or concerns during and after the adoption process (NTI, 2019), including the following:

- **Infertility:** Parents may be motivated to adopt due to infertility. They may be experiencing feelings of loss of a child who shared their genes.
- **Lost time with the child:** Adoptive parents may feel loss or grief due to not giving birth to the child they adopted, missing the first months or years of the child's life, or not being there to protect the child from harm.
- **Their own adoption as a child:** Parents may have been in foster care or adopted themselves. Although this may have been a positive experience for many, some parents may adopt a child as an attempt to deal with unresolved grief.
- **Differing viewpoints:** Adoptive couples may have very different views or expectations about the adoption, and this decision may be a test of strength for the relationship.

Parents also may feel a sense of loss of their "fantasy child" if the child they adopted does not measure up to what they wanted or expected in a child. Helping parents explore their motivations and whether these emotions or concerns may be present can help them address any issues and seek help, if needed (NTI, 2019).

Issues When Adopting a Relative

Adopting a relative's child may bring about emotions or concerns beyond those that may be experienced by nonrelative adoptive parents, possibly including the following (NTI, 2019):

- Mixed feelings about the loss of their current role (e.g., grandparent, aunt)
- Guilt regarding the birth parent's problems
- Guilt for taking over the parental role for the child
- Belief they are betraying the birth parent by becoming the legal parent
- Mixed feelings about what they may be giving up (e.g., retirement, current lifestyle)
- Worries about additional financial obligations
- Family conflict or loyalty issues among relatives

Relatives also may struggle with a desire to help the birth parents succeed as parents and overcome their challenges even as they want to make a lifetime commitment to the child. Caseworkers should explore with relative placements whether these issues may be present and help them cope.

CHILDREN WITH A HISTORY OF TRAUMA

Because almost all children adopted from foster care have experienced trauma, adoptive parents should be educated about the particular needs of children who have experienced trauma, including the lifelong effects it can have on brain development and behavior. Trauma can affect children differently, but children with a history of trauma may experience more anxiety than normal as well as see and respond to real or perceived threats in ways that others do not (American Academy of Pediatrics & Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2016). Trauma may also make it more difficult for children to trust their adoptive parents. More information for parents about raising a child with a history of trauma can be found in these publications: *Parenting After Trauma: Understanding Your Child's Needs: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* (<https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/healthy-foster-care-america/Documents/FamilyHandout.pdf>), *Parenting Children and Youth Who Have Experienced Abuse or Neglect* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/parenting-CAN/>), and *Parenting a Child or Youth Who Has Been Sexually Abused: A Guide for Foster and Adoptive Parents* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-abused/>).

Experiencing the trauma of child maltreatment can change or impair children's brain development, which can affect mental, emotional, and behavioral health into adulthood (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). By utilizing early intervention services and supportive, caring parenting practices, however, adoptive parents can promote healthy brain development and set a strong foundation for improved outcomes. For additional information, visit Information Gateway's Brain/Cognitive Development webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/impact/development/brain/>.

The following provide information and resources to assist children affected by trauma:

- **Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Abuse and/or Neglect:** An Information Gateway webpage that has resources about parenting practices for parents with children who have a history of trauma
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/foster/parenting-children-who-have-experienced-abuse-andor-neglect/>
- **Attachment and Trauma Network:** A national coalition to support the families of children who have experienced trauma, including a database of attachment and trauma-related resources and supports and private, online peer-to-peer support groups
<http://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org>
- **Understanding Trauma:** A page on the AdoptUSKids website about supporting children who have experienced trauma
<https://www.adoptuskids.org/meet-the-children/children-in-foster-care/about-the-children/understanding-trauma>

ATTACHMENT

Children who have been abused or neglected may have difficulty forming attachments or trusting caregivers. Although adoptive parents may hope for a strong relationship with their adopted children to develop quickly, they should keep in mind that they may need to give the relationship time to develop and remember to respect their child's feelings and personal space during the transition (AdoptUSKids, n.d.-b). Caseworkers should also remind parents that promoting positive attachment may require significant effort and changes in their own behaviors. New adoptive parents often need to focus on relationship building first rather than seeking to change children's behaviors right away. One way to help build attachment is to have the family make changes to fit the child's needs and traditions instead of expecting the child make all the changes.

Parents should be aware of their own attachment style and emotional state, as well as any personal history that may be affecting either (Purvis, Cross, Dansereau, & Parris, 2013). You may need to provide guidance to parents or refer them to a service provider who can help them learn skills and strategies for developing secure relationships with their children. You can also remind them that parents also can have difficulty forming attachments to their adopted children and adjusting to the new family dynamics. For example, a parent may initially feel unready to say, "I love you" to the child, or they may not yet feel "like a family."

Also, remind parents that there may be a "honeymoon" period during the first few weeks or months following placement in which the child—and even other family members—are on their best behavior (AdoptUSKids, n.d.-b). When this period comes to an end, the child may begin to test limits or develop other behaviors that could be deemed problematic. If and when the honeymoon period ends, parents should be patient, remain committed, and continue building their relationship with their child even when feelings of love and affection are not reciprocated.

The following resources offer tips for parents on how to promote healthy attachment with their adopted children:

- **Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption** (Information Gateway): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/>
- **Nurturing and Attachment** (Information Gateway): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/protectfactors/nurture-attach/>
- **Helping Children Form Attachments** (AdoptUSKids): <https://www.adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/receiving-a-placement/forming-attachments>
- **Association for Training and Trauma on Attachment in Children**: <http://www.attach.org>

The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals offers free online training that assists caseworkers and other agency staff in identifying strategies to help families create a nurturing environment to facilitate healthy attachment and address trauma. You may access the training at <https://learn.childwelfare.gov/>.

Considerations When Adopting Older Children and Youth

In addition to the general issues when adopting any child, parents adopting older children and youth may have some additional factors to consider. For example, adoptive parents may need assistance differentiating normal adolescent behaviors (e.g., seeking independence, decision-making overly influenced by emotions) from behaviors resulting from previous grief, loss, and trauma (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015). Children adopted at an older age will also have different perspectives and life experiences than younger children, possibly including increased independence, additional disrupted placements, and more or stronger connections with birth families. Parents adopting older children and youth need to be prepared to discuss and be open about topics pertinent to adolescents, such as substance use and sexual identity, while still building a relationship with their child. Furthermore, these youth may need assistance obtaining a driver's license or preparing for college or employment, which may include seeking out financial assistance for which they are eligible.

For additional information on older child adoption, visit the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) website at <https://www.nacac.org/help/adoption-practice/older-child-adoption/>.

SELF-CARE

Some adoptive parents find they need support to work through the emotions that arise before, during, or after the adoption is finalized (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Ensure parents are familiar with the following types of supports:

- Adoption-competent counselors or therapists can provide therapeutic services to parents—as well as children and the family as a whole—to address adoption-related issues. To help families find appropriate support, you can refer them to Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>.
- Respite care offers parents a short break from the responsibilities of parenting, giving them an opportunity to rest, practice self-care, and take advantage of additional support services. Respite can range from a few hours to a few days.
- Connections with other adoptive parents can be a valuable source of reassurance and support, both during the placement process and after the adoption is finalized. Preadoption contact with adults who were adopted and birth families can also benefit prospective adoptive parents (Lee et al., 2018). For a list of adoption support groups by State, visit Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/> (select your State and then select Kinship, Foster Care and Adoption Support Groups under the Support Groups section).

Additional supports and services may be available through your agency or in their communities.

CONNECTIONS WITH BIRTH FAMILIES

Caseworkers should emphasize the importance of children maintaining connections with their birth families, including siblings and other significant people in their lives, after adoption. Postplacement contact with birth families, as well as other prior caregivers, when safe, can enhance children's emotional well-being and help them navigate this journey in several ways (NTI, 2019):

- Preventing denial and avoidance of their circumstances
- Managing emotions about separation
- Providing opportunities to validate their feelings
- Allowing them to consider the reasons they were separated from their family
- Decreasing magical thinking (i.e., children's creation of unrealistic fantasies to fill in unknown information about their birth families)
- Decreasing feelings of conflicted loyalty

The following are strategies caseworkers can use to support successful communication between adoptive and birth families (National Resource Center for Adoption, 2014):

- Educate the adoptive families, as well as the children and birth families, on ways to remain in contact (e.g., letters, emails, phone calls, personal visits, social media).
- Let everyone know the type and level of communication should be in the best interests of the child and that communication needs may change over time.
- Introduce prospective adoptive families to current adoptive families who are successfully maintaining continuing contact after adoption so that prospective families can learn from them.
- Refer birth and adoptive families to agency or community mediation services for assistance in creating formal contact agreements.

For more information about maintaining connections, read Information Gateway's *Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-maintainrelationships/>) or visit the Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/postplacement/connections/>. Additionally, to learn more about laws regarding contact agreements in your State, read *Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/laws-policies/statutes/cooperative/>.

For information on social media use in adoption, visit Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/social-media-adoption/>.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SUPPORT

Caseworkers should ensure parents understand the potential costs of adopting a child as well as the financial resources available to them prior to an adoption finalization. The following are examples of financial programs adoptive parents may be able to seek assistance from:

- **Adoption assistance:** Children adopted from foster care may be eligible for the Federal title IV-E reimbursements for recurring monthly payments for a child's care and/or nonrecurring expenses (e.g., adoption fees, home studies, attorney fees, court costs). If a child is not eligible for title IV-E adoption assistance, State programs may be available for certain expenses. For more information on what is available in your State, visit the Adoption Assistance by State webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-assistance/>.
- **Medical assistance:** Most children adopted from foster care are eligible for medical assistance, often including medical insurance through Medicaid (AdoptUsKids, n.d.-b). Children who qualify for Federal adoption assistance are automatically qualified for Medicaid. The Adoption Assistance by State webpage also offers information about medical assistance benefits.

- **Tax credits:** Federal or State tax credits may be available to adoptive parents. For information about Federal tax credits, visit the Internal Revenue Service website at <https://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc607> or the NACAC website at <https://www.nacac.org/help/adoption-tax-credit/adoption-tax-credit-2019/>. For information about which States offer tax credits, as well as additional State-specific information, visit the NACAC website at <https://www.nacac.org/help/adoption-assistance/adoption-assistance-us/state-programs/>.
- **Employer-provided benefits:** Some employers may offer benefits, such as financial assistance or parental leave, for employees who adopt a child. Parents should check with their employer to determine what may be available to them.
- **Education expense assistance:** Children adopted from foster care may be eligible for Federal programs that can aid in postsecondary education expenses as well as tuition waivers or scholarships from States and private organizations. To learn about programs that may be available in your area, visit <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/assistance/> or <https://www.nacac.org/resource/college-expenses-adopted-child-foster-care/>.

Additional information on financial support can be found in Information Gateway's Adoption Costs and Sources of Financial Support web section at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/expenses/> as well as in *Planning for Adoption: Knowing the Costs and Resources* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s-cost/>.

PREPLACEMENT VISITS

Preplacement visits should occur before the official placement to help the child and adoptive family become better acquainted and ease the transition (Wynne, 2016). These visits also may provide opportunities for the adoptive parents to interact with the child's foster family and learn more about the child, including routines and preferences (AdoptUSKids, n.d.-b). Additionally, they allow the child to learn more about the new environment and community in which they will be living as well as family culture and expectations. If possible, these visits should begin with daytime visits in the child's current home or somewhere they are comfortable and then progress to visits in the adoptive family's home, beginning with day visits and eventually leading to overnight and weekend visits. If in-person visits are not possible due to long distances, online meetings (e.g., Skype) may help the child and family get to know each other and build familiarity. As a part of the preplacement visits and to ease the child's transition to the home, adoptive families may want to allow the child to provide input on what items are placed in the room or what colors are used. (AdoptUSKids, n.d.-b).

Preplacement visits can be stressful for families, and parents may experience issues or setbacks with the child during these visits. They may be fearful that bringing up concerns at this point in the process could affect the adoption finalization. You should encourage prospective adoptive families to bring up any issues that arise during this period so they can be addressed.

PREPARING THE CHILD'S NEW SIBLINGS

Facilitating healthy attachments and interactions among all siblings in the family—including birth, foster, and adopted children—is an essential goal. When children have different statuses in their families or special needs that require a significant amount of parental attention, it can create stress within the family or cause negative interactions. Other dynamics can lead to tensions as well. For example, one adopted child may have extensive information about his or her background, as well as ongoing contact with birth relatives, while another may not.

The following are strategies adoptive parents can use to build strong relationships among all children in the family (AdoptUSKids, n.d.-a):

- Involve children already in the home in the adoption process (as appropriate) by talking with them about the adoption, the process, and the potential impacts on the family
- Share information about the child being adopted, possibly including why the child was placed in foster care
- Use preplacement visits to help the children get to know each other
- Let children in the home know that the new sibling may need extra attention for some time but also reassure them that you will also be focused on their needs and create one-on-one time with them

After the child comes to live with his or her new family, the parents can also seek opportunities or activities the new siblings can do together to help develop bonds. Caseworkers also may need to help parents consider steps for protecting other children in the home, especially if the child being adopted has a history of violence or has been sexually abused.

For additional strategies, refer to 11 Tips for Building Strong Relationships Among Family Members on the AdoptUSKids website at <https://adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/receiving-a-placement/building-family-relationships>.

Information Gateway's *Working With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Families in Foster Care and Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-profbulletin/>) provides useful information for caseworkers about supporting the LGBTQ community in adoption.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS

The following are additional topics you should discuss with families during the adoption process:

- **Legal and agency processes:** Caseworkers should ensure parents are familiar with the procedural steps in adopting a child. Talk to them about the child's current legal status, particularly if parental rights have not yet been terminated.
- **Physical and mental health needs:** Parents may need to consult with the child's current health team to determine how they can best prepare for the child's physical and mental health needs, including ensuring access to providers and health records and understanding the child's prescriptions.
- **Benefits transfer:** Some benefits for the child (e.g., Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income) may be assigned to the agency. Caseworkers should help parents determine how to transfer benefits so they become the payee for the child and, in interstate adoption cases, help parents access benefits in their home community.
- **Education logistics:** Parents will need to make sure that the child is enrolled in school and that they have complete education records, including any individualized education program documents.
- **Race and culture:** If the child being adopted has a different race or culture from the adoptive parents, provide information to parents about the child's race and culture as well as guidance about related parenting topics (e.g., assisting children in forming a racial or cultural identity, helping children and the family adapt). For resources on this topic, visit Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/culturally-competent/transracial/>.
- **Children's names.** Parents should consider both what the child will be called as well as how they will be addressed. Some children may want to change their last names to match that of their adoptive family, but others may want to maintain the name they have always had, which is part of their identity and birth family (Jarema, 2012). Depending on the child's age and developmental stage, parents may want to talk with the child about both their first and last names.
- **How parents want to be addressed.** Some children may be apprehensive about calling their adoptive parents "mom," "dad," or another familiar name (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015).
- **Discipline:** If a child has been maltreated, he or she may perceive any physical punishment as abusive. Consequently, caseworkers should urge adoptive parents to use nonphysical methods of punishment (Wynne, 2016). Negative or punitive punishments also could adversely affect the child's behaviors. Parents may need to be taught new parenting skills that are therapeutic and promote attachment in children affected by trauma.

Postadoption Support

Adoptive families will continue to need support after the adoption is finalized. It is critical for caseworkers to ensure adoptive parents know about and have access to postadoption services and supports that match the needs of the child and other family members. Accessing such support is a normal part of adoption. Whenever possible, connect parents with services, supports, and trainings even before placement so they have fewer barriers to accessing services when a need arises. Informal supports, such as family and friends, can also provide needed assistance and should be included in any postadoption support planning.

Parents should also be aware that postadoption support needs may arise or even increase years later (AdoptUSKids, 2015). Additionally, alert parents to any changes in the levels of support provided by the agency after an adoption is finalized. Common types of postadoption supports include educational and informational services, clinical services (for the child, parents, and/or both), material assistance, and support networks (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

The following resources from Information Gateway provide additional information about postadoption supports:

- Adoption Support and Preservation Services [web section]:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/postplacement/services/>
- *Providing Adoption Support and Preservation Services*:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoptbulletin/>
- *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists*:
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>

CONCLUSION

Outcomes for children and families can be improved when parents are better prepared for an adoptive placement, including knowing how they can best meet the child's needs and understanding the emotions involved for all. It is important to help parents set realistic expectations for the adoption and their child and ensure that families have a comprehensive set of supports both before and after the adoption is finalized. Even when parents are familiar with the child, they still require comprehensive preparation. When developing the preparation plan for a family, you should account for the specific needs and circumstances of both the child and the adoptive family.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The following publications by Information Gateway can help parents support their adopted children at different stages:

- *Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler*: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preschool/>
- *Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child*: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-school-age/>
- *Parenting Your Adopted Teenager*: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-teenager/>

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AdoptUSKids. (n.d.-a). *11 tips for building strong relationships among family members*. Retrieved from <https://adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/receiving-a-placement/building-family-relationships>

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Preparing Children and Youth for Adoption or Other Family Permanency

Children, including youth, leaving out-of-home care for adoption or other family permanency require preparation and support to help them understand past events in their lives and process feelings connected to their experiences of abuse and neglect, separation, and loss. They may be challenged by new surroundings and need to affirm their own identity and allow themselves to create new or different relationships with their birth and adoptive families as well as others. Achieving permanency is not just an *outcome* for these children; it is a *process*.

This bulletin will help child welfare professionals better understand the feelings and emotions children may experience regarding permanency and prepare them for placements with permanent families. Its focus is on adoption, but much of the information

is also applicable to children with other permanency goals, such as kinship care or guardianship.

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UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS AND FEELINGS REGARDING PERMANENCY

Those working with children who have been in out-of-home care and are preparing for permanency should make sure they understand how each child perceives his or her situation. How a child views the permanency process will likely be very different from how a professional views it. Prior to and during the transition to a new family, children may experience the following emotions or feelings:

- **Loss and grief.** The loss of a parent can be one of the most significant losses a child will ever experience. Children who are placed in the child welfare system may have complex histories of loss and unresolved grief. The loss of a parent—temporary or permanent—can have a profound impact on a child, even if he or she was removed from the home as a result of a parent's maltreatment (National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative [NTI], 2019). In addition to the loss of their parents upon removal from the home, they also may experience the loss of siblings, friends, supportive adults, classmates, pets, familiar surroundings, cultural connections, and more. Each subsequent placement transition could also lead to additional losses. Children experiencing loss may exhibit fears of abandonment, lack of trust, and issues of holding on and letting go (NTI, 2019).

- **Uncertainty and confusion.** Many children are left to wonder about the circumstances that brought them into care, why their families may not be able to continue caring for them, and who will be there to take care of them and protect them. A child may experience anger, sadness, and even depression. Many children struggle with their changed role within the family system or sibling status when they are removed from their birth family. For example, a child may have been the only child in his or her birth family, but the adoptive family may include several children. Children also may continue to worry and think about their birth families. They may be confused if their own feelings about a permanent placement do not match others' expectations of how they should react. For example, adults in the child's life may expect him or her to feel happy or grateful to be joining a new family, but the child may still desire to live with his or her birth family or be grieving the loss of that family (NTI, 2019). When children are placed with relatives, they may feel uncertain or confused about their new role within the family and about how others' roles may change (e.g., the child's grandmother or aunt may now be acting as the mother figure) (NTI, 2019).

For information about working with parents adopting a child from foster care, refer to Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Preparing Adoptive Parents* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-adoptiveparents/>.

- **Anxiety.** Children about to join or who have joined a new family may feel anxious about the transition (Jarema, 2012). Just as they may grieve being separated from people and places familiar to them, they may worry about the changes and different situations they will encounter with their new family, home, school, etc.
- **Divided loyalties.** Many children, particularly adolescents, have conflicting feelings about being a permanent member of a new family. They may still have strong emotional ties to parents and siblings and may fantasize about or hold out hope for reconciliation even when legal ties have been terminated.

Caseworkers who understand children's experiences from the child's point of view will be better able to help them address past issues and explore the possibilities of new relationships. It is important to acknowledge the feelings the child is having, as minimizing them may result in additional unresolved grief (Pickover & Brown, 2016). Caseworkers also should recognize that each child's thoughts and feelings, as well as any resulting behaviors, stemming from the transition to the permanent home may be different.

PREPARING CHILDREN FOR PERMANENCY

Working with children to prepare them for permanency in relationships should include both steps to address past traumas of loss and abuse/neglect and opportunities to give meaning to existing and future relationships. Several foundational principles can help agencies implement an overall approach

to supporting and guiding children as they identify and establish permanent relationships:

- Permanency is a *process* for a child, not just an outcome. It should begin before placement and extend after the placement has occurred.
- Preparing children for a new home should occur regardless of the permanency goal or outcome.
- Encourage children to express their emotions, concerns, and thoughts regarding the placement and validate their feelings.
- Maintaining connections to the birth family and important people from a child's past may help to foster positive identity development and mitigate negative outcomes.
- Permanency work with children requires time, consistency, honesty, and authenticity from social workers.
- Work with children should not be considered only in the context of therapy. Although behavioral health services may be appropriate for any individual child, engaging the child in activities, tasks, and conversations to prepare him or her for permanency can be the work of caseworkers, caregivers, social workers, family members, court personnel, and others. In some cases, birth parents or other birth relatives may be able to help the permanency process by giving their children "permission" to move on to a new family.

- The readiness activities children and youth engage in must be developmentally appropriate. The cognitive and emotional abilities of the child should determine the types of activities and resources used in permanency preparation work.
- Permanency planning (the legal process) is distinct from permanency preparation work (the relational process). Children can be empowered by their participation in the planning process (as age appropriate and if desired), including their involvement in recruitment and family-finding activities, and by knowing and understanding the steps in the permanency and transition processes. Although these activities may engage them in some of the emotional tasks of preparing for permanency, a more comprehensive preparation program should help them explore their feelings about life events and support their readiness for permanency.
- Children need preparation for new family relationships, just as adoptive parents and guardians do.

This section describes strategies caseworkers can use to prepare children for their transition to a permanent family.

ENSURING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND PERMANENCY

Children, particularly younger children, may have difficulty understanding what joining a new, permanent family means. They may not understand the difference between foster care and adoption (or other permanency options). Children being adopted by their foster family still may find the transition

confusing or experience difficult emotions, even if they have a good relationship with their foster family (NTI, 2019). While initially in foster care, children may believe that reunification with their birth family is still possible, and during the transition to adoption, they may experience a different set of emotions and behaviors than when they were first removed from their home.

Below are some ideas that may help to encourage that process (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018; National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015):

- Explain what a permanent family means in terms that are appropriate to the child's age and developmental level.
- Ask children to respond in their own words to open-ended questions about any perceived difference between foster care and adoption (e.g., "How do you think being adopted is different from being in foster care?").
- Let children know that being adopted does not mean they need to forget about their birth or foster family.
- Remind children that adoption makes them a "forever" member of the family, even as an adult.
- Provide opportunities for children to speak with other children who have been adopted about the permanency process (as appropriate).

Helping Foster Parents to Support Children Transitioning to Permanency

Foster parents can play a critical role in helping a child transition from foster care to adoption or other permanency. In some cases, they may become the child's adoptive parents, but they frequently also may be helping the child prepare to join another family. Foster parents can also give children "permission" to join—or explore joining—a new family. Caseworkers can support foster parents in this process by providing them with the following tips and responsibilities (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2019):

- Consider themselves part of the transition team.
- Read books to the child related to adoption and families.
- Help the child recognize and manage their feelings.
- Provide relevant information to the caseworker and therapist, if applicable.
- Provide material to the caseworker to assist in keeping the child's lifebook current. (See the Lifebooks section in this bulletin for more information.)
- Remind the child they will always care about the child and reinforce a positive self-image for the child.

Caseworkers should also be aware that foster parents may experience their own grief when a child leaves their home. To help reduce and resolve the grief foster parents may feel, caseworkers and agencies can ensure that foster parent training or other preparation includes information about what it may be like for them when a child leaves their home, allow the foster parents to participate in the child's transition to a permanent home, and provide support to them during and after the transition (Hebert, Kulkin, & McLean, 2013). This may also assist in retaining foster parents for future placements.

EXAMINING LOYALTY TO THE BIRTH FAMILY

Children who will be or have been adopted may still feel a sense of loyalty to their birth parents as well as their foster families or relative caregivers. This is normal. Caseworkers can help children understand these feelings and seek ways to establish new, loving relationships with their adoptive family while also honoring their birth family. For example, it is often in the child or youth's best interests to maintain postadoption contact with his or her birth family. This

ongoing connection can lessen the loss and grief associated with separation, support identity development, and help children and youth overcome adversity as they prepare for adulthood. (See the Discussing Postadoption Contact section of this bulletin for more information).

Names may also be a worry for some children. Some children may want to change their last name to match that of their adoptive family, but others may want to maintain the name they have always had, which is part

of their identity and birth family (Jarema, 2012). Caseworkers can address this issue with the child as well as the adoptive family. Additionally, some children may be apprehensive about calling their adoptive parents "mom," "dad," or another familiar name (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015). Caseworkers can explain to children that they can refer to their adoptive parents by a name with which they are comfortable. It can be a different term than how they referred to their birth parents. If a relative is the adoptive parent, the child may want to continue addressing them as before (e.g., grandpa, aunt).

Caseworkers also can discuss these issues with the birth, foster, and adoptive families so they can ensure children feel they have "permission" to establish new relationships. It is necessary for children to hear and feel from people who are important to them that it is okay to love another family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

DISCUSSING POSTADOPTION CONTACT

Whenever possible, children who are adopted should maintain connections with their birth family, including siblings and others. Postplacement contact with birth families, as well as other prior caregivers, can enhance children's emotional well-being and help them navigate this journey in several ways, including the following (NTI, 2019):

- Prevents denial and avoidance of their circumstances
- Manages emotions about separation
- Provides opportunities to validate their feelings

- Allows them to consider the reasons why they were separated from their family
- Decreases magical thinking (i.e., children's creation of unrealistic fantasies to fill in unknown information about their birth families)
- Decreases feelings of conflicted loyalty
- Helps the child develop his or her cultural identity

Caseworkers should explain to children in a developmentally appropriate way that they may be able to maintain some degree of contact with their birth family and other prior caregivers (National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment, 2015). However, caseworkers should also be honest with them about circumstances that may hinder potential communication (e.g., safety issues, mental health issues). Additionally, caseworkers should let children know that the number and duration of the visits may change over time and the caseworker or other agency staff will not be there to supervise the visits.

For more information about maintaining connections, read Information Gateway's *Helping Children and Youth Maintain Relationships With Birth Families* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-maintainrelationships/>) or visit the Information Gateway website at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/postplacement/connections/>.

HELPING CHILDREN GET TO KNOW THEIR PERMANENT FAMILIES

Children will likely be curious or anxious about living with a new family. Caseworkers can help ease children's minds by providing information, as appropriate, about the family

and their new home and by arranging for preplacement visits. Information that could be shared with children includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Basic information about the adoptive parents
- Information about any other children in the family
- Where the family lives
- What the family's interests are
- Pictures of the family
- Information about pets
- The family's culture or religion, if different from the child's

Reviewing this information with children prior to them meeting the prospective parents helps ensure they are not complete strangers to the child (Jarema, 2012).

Caseworkers also may want to help the child understand family rules as well as the consequences when rules are broken (Wynne, 2016). If a child has been maltreated, he or she may perceive any physical punishment as abusive. Consequently, caseworkers should urge adoptive parents to use nonphysical methods of punishment.

Preplacement visits should occur before the official placement to help the child and family become better acquainted and ease the transition (Wynne, 2016). Even if the child already has a relationship with the family, these visits are an important part of the process. If possible, these visits should begin with daytime visits in the child's current home or somewhere they are comfortable

and then progress to visits in the adoptive family's home, beginning with day visits and eventually leading to overnight and weekend visits. During visits that occur in the adoptive family's home, the caseworker could encourage the child to bring one or two of their personal belongings to leave there. Additionally, the caseworker could recommend to the adoptive family to allow the child to provide input on what items are placed in the room or what colors will be present (AdoptUSKids, n.d.).

If in-person visits are not possible due to long distances, online meetings (e.g., Skype) may help the child and family get to know each other and build familiarity. The caseworker should assess the child's comfort level before and after visits. These visits can assist in lessening children's fears and worries, transferring attachment to the adoptive parents, initiating the grieving process, empowering the new caregivers, and reassuring commitments for the future (NTI, 2019).

LIFEBOOKS

When children spend extended periods in out-of-home care, memories of significant events and people can be lost. Children may lose their sense of self: who they are, where they have lived, the people they have lived with, where they went to school, memories of favorite items (e.g., stuffed animals or blankets), and more. Lifebooks help children remember and maintain connections from their past as well as integrate their previous experiences into their current lives. Several resources exist to help caseworkers, birth families, foster and adoptive parents, and other important adults work with children

on creating and maintaining this record of their lives. For additional information, visit Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/>.

GOODBYE VISITS

During goodbye visits, children and their birth parents meet prior to the final placement decision to help each of them process the upcoming adoption. (In some cases, these visits may occur when a termination of parental rights is granted, even if an adoption is not imminent.) Contrary to the term, however, this meeting does not necessarily signify that the child and birth parents will cease all contact. Many birth parents and children maintain relationships well past this visit. During the goodbye visit, it is helpful for the child to hear the following messages from his or her birth parents (Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Children and Family Services, 2013):

- He or she is loved.
- He or she will be missed.
- The family's involvement with the child welfare system is not the child's fault.
- It is okay to be happy and love someone else.

If an in-person goodbye visit is not possible, caseworkers can work with the adoptive and birth parents to find an alternative, such as having the adoptive parents read a letter written by the birth parent, playing a video of the birth parents, having a virtual meeting (e.g., Skype), or conducting the meeting with another birth relative (NTI, 2019).

Below are some resources for how goodbye visits are conducted in select jurisdictions:

- *How We Do the Work of Preparing a Child for Adoption: Good-Bye Visits* (Arkansas): <https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/images/uploads/dcf/Preparing%20for%20Adoption%20Good-bye%20Visits.pdf>
- *Tip Sheet: Preparing for the "Goodbye" Visit* (Kentucky): <http://manuals.sp.chfs.ky.gov/Resources/Related%20Resources%20Library/Preparing%20for%20the%20Goodbye%20Visit%20Tip%20Sheet.doc>
- *DHS Child Welfare Procedure Manual* (Oregon): http://www.dhs.state.or.us/caf/safety_model/procedure_manual/Oregon-DHS-Child-Welfare-Procedure-Manual.pdf

It is also important for caseworkers to ensure birth parents are emotionally ready for goodbye visits as part of the transition process. The links above also provide information about how to prepare birth parents.

ENSURING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Even when caseworkers use the other strategies described in this bulletin, issues such as loss and grief may emerge as children and families move through different stages. Children in foster care often have traumatic histories that affect them in ways that may be difficult for them to put into words and that may make it harder for them to form trusting relationships with new family members (Lefebvre, 2013). The sense of loss may be greater if the child has experienced multiple foster placements. An adoption-competent behavioral health professional can be exceptionally valuable in helping children

understand and, if needed, resolve any related emotions and feelings. For information about helping families select a behavioral health professional, refer to Information Gateway's

Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>.

3-5-7 Model

The 3-5-7 Model helps children frame past experiences and address current circumstances to help them explore and understand permanency in relationships. It specifies three tasks, five questions, and seven skill elements (Denby, Gomez, & Alford, 2018).

The tasks are (1) clarification of life events, (2) integration of the experiences and meanings of relationships in different families, and (3) actualization of memberships in their identified network of families. The child works on these tasks by exploring five conceptual questions, each of which addresses a specific issue:

- 1.** What happened to me?
- 2.** Who am I?
- 3.** Where am I going?
- 4.** How will I get there?
- 5.** When will I know I belong?

The final component of the model is the seven skill elements used by those working with the children:

- 1.** Use engagement activities that encourage expression of feelings and thoughts about life experiences.
- 2.** Create a safe space for expressing feelings.
- 3.** Recognize that behaviors are based in pain and trauma.
- 4.** Respond briefly to the child's comments in order to provide space to grieve.
- 5.** Listen.
- 6.** Affirm their stories.
- 7.** Be present as they do the work of grieving.

These elements may vary slightly according to the age of the child.

For more information about the 3-5-7 Model, visit <http://darlahenry.org/the-3-5-7-model/>.

CONCLUSION

Preparing children for adoption and other permanent relationships should be a process that involves the caseworker, foster and adoptive families, relative caregivers, and others who are important to the child. With the appropriate supports, children and families can heal from difficult life experiences, move toward resolution of past losses, and build readiness for relational and legal permanency. It is also important to remember that helping children transition to a new permanent family does not mean they must sever all ties with their past. Maintaining relationships with their birth family and other connections to their past can help children form positive identities and promote their well-being.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Center for Adoption Support and Education:** Offers resources for children, teens, and adults
<https://www.adoptionsupport.org>
- **National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative:** Provides two state-of-the-art web-based trainings that focus on building the capacity of child welfare and mental health professionals to understand and effectively address the mental health challenges for children experiencing foster care, adoption, or guardianship and their families
<https://learn.childwelfare.gov/>
- **Books About Adoption (PBS Kids for Parents):** Lists books for children about adoption
<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/books-about-adoption>

- **Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway):** Offers tips to help foster parents prepare children in their care for adoption
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/>
- **Talking With Older Youth About Adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway & AdoptUSKids):** Provides child welfare professionals with a framework for how to talk with older youth about permanency, including key considerations and suggestions for starting a conversation as well as ways to make these discussions more effective and meaningful
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/talking/>
- **Talking About Adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway):** Presents resources to help families and people who have been adopted discuss adoption
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/talking/>

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The Impact of Adoption

Although adoption is often a joyful and exciting occasion, it can also give rise to lifelong challenges for members of the adoption constellation—adoptees, birth parents and their extended family members, and adoptive parents and their extended family members. How and when you are affected by both the positive elements and challenging issues of adoption depend on many factors, including your personality, family dynamics, and what might be happening in the world around you.

Members of the adoption constellation may experience any number of the following seven core issues related to adoption:

1. Loss
2. Rejection
3. Shame and guilt
4. Grief
5. Identity
6. Intimacy
7. Mastery and control

Awareness of these issues can help families better understand each other and the personal effects of the adoption experience. This factsheet provides an overview of the seven core issues in adoption and how they may affect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of children and adults who have been adopted, birth parents, and adoptive parents—also known as the "adoption triad." Other members of the adoption constellation, such as grandparents, aunts, or uncles, may also relate to some of the core issues discussed in this factsheet. Links to additional resources are also provided.

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Seven core issues in adoption

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SEVEN CORE ISSUES IN ADOPTION

The core issues listed above were first introduced in a 1982 article by Silverstein and Kaplan titled *Seven Core Issues in Adoption*. A 2019 update (Roszia & Maxon) called *Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency: A Comprehensive Guide to Promoting Understanding and Healing in Adoption, Foster Care, Kinship Families and Third Party Reproduction* expands on these seven core issues, broadens the description of who may encounter them to include people who have experienced adoption and all forms of permanency, and draws on the perspectives and experiences of diverse groups of people who have been affected by adoption. Every person affected by adoption may not experience all seven issues or encounter them in the order in which they are described here. Experiences can manifest differently depending on a person's age and developmental stage, the situation in which they were adopted, and their personal history or life situation. Regardless of your adoption experience—whether you were adopted; whether you adopted an infant, child, or young person through an agency, the foster care system, or another country; or whether the adoption was voluntary or involuntary—these lifelong challenges will likely affect you at some point.

To read more about the content in the 2019 update, visit <https://www.nacac.org/resource/seven-core-issues-in-adoption-and-permanency/>.

LOSS

Loss is the central issue faced by those involved with adoption (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). For birth parents, people who were adopted, and adoptive parents, involvement with adoption is typically associated with an initial loss that continues to affect them throughout their lives.

For birth parents, adoption means the loss of a child whom they may never see again and the loss of a parenting role. People who were adopted may lose their birth families, including siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. They may lose a cultural connection or language (in cases of intercountry or transracial/transcultural adoption). If they were adopted as older children, they may also lose friends, foster families, pets, schools, neighborhoods, and familiar surroundings. Adoptive parents may have experienced loss associated with incomplete pregnancies, failed fertility treatments, and dreams of raising a child with whom they are genetically connected.

Adoption-related loss may be vague and difficult to understand, especially for birth parents and adoptees. Adoption-related loss is described as a feeling of distress and confusion about people who are physically absent but psychologically present in your life (sometimes called "ambiguous loss") (FosterParentCollege.com, 2016). With ambiguous loss, you may think often about the person or people you miss and wonder whether they are alive, if you will see them again, and if they think about you. What makes this type of loss difficult is that it's not

well recognized by the larger society (Roszia & Maxon, 2019). The uncertainty of adoption-related loss makes it difficult for birth parents and people who were adopted to grieve and delays the grieving process.

Support groups can help create a sense of community and shared experience, and they may provide a good outlet for coping with residual feelings related to an adoption, such as loss or grief. If you are interested in finding a support group, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>).

REJECTION

The loss experienced in adoption is often heightened by feelings of rejection, particularly for those who have been adopted. People who were adopted commonly feel rejected by their birth parents, even if they were adopted as infants. If you were adopted, that sense of rejection may lead to challenges with self-esteem and a sense of belonging, as well as a tendency to avoid certain situations or relationships for fear of being hurt.

Feelings of rejection are normal and common for members of the adoption triad. If you're an adoptive parent, you may wonder if you were meant to be a parent and may watch for signs of rejection from your child. Some children or young people, particularly those adopted from foster care, may unintentionally project their feelings of rejection, anger, and abandonment onto their adoptive parents. This experience can be painful for the parents. It is wise for adoptive parents to prepare for this possibility, to recognize the behavior as

a sign of trust and valuable communication, and to model compassion and acceptance. To learn more, refer to Information Gateway's *Helping Your Child Transition From Foster Care to Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-transition/>).

Search and Reunion

Thanks to advances in technology, specifically the internet—including social media—and more accessible DNA testing, birth families and people who were adopted are more easily able to research family contact information and establish connections than in the past. Since search and reunion can be emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before conducting search and reunion efforts. It helps to think through expectations and prepare for a range of potential outcomes and reactions, including rejection, from the other party. For more information, see the Information Gateway publication, *Searching for Birth Relatives* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-search/>).

SHAME AND GUILT

Shame and guilt about adoption or being adopted may worsen feelings of grief. The shame of being involved in adoption may be subconscious. Shame and guilt associated with adoption may affect your self-esteem,

discourage you from thinking positively about yourself, and limit you from loving and receiving love from others (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

For example, an adoptive parent may feel ashamed for being unable to have a biological child. If you were adopted, you may feel ashamed because your birth parents were unable to raise you themselves. A birth parent may feel guilty and ashamed for having an unplanned pregnancy and admitting the situation to parents, friends, coworkers, and others. After the birth, the decision to choose adoption for the child may prompt new feelings of guilt about “rejecting” the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or difficult the circumstances of the adoption.

For more information about shame in adoption, visit the Pact website (<http://www.pactadopt.org/resources/shame-and-secrecy-in-adoption.html>).

GRIEF

Grief is the pain that stems from loss and the recognition of the family or life that was lost through adoption. It is natural and often occurs throughout the lifelong journey of adoption. Birth parents tend to experience intense grief at the time of the adoption, and that grief may reemerge periodically, including at milestones such as the child's birthday or when he or she is old enough to start school. During adolescence, people who were adopted may feel intense grief as they become more aware of the separation from their birth families and further develop their identities (Roszia & Maxon, 2019).

Adoption-related grief isn't widely known or understood by society at large. We lack formal rituals or ceremonies to mark the loss caused by adoption and the resulting grief. If you are a member of the triad, you may not be aware that you are grieving. Because our culture considers people who were adopted “lucky” to have been chosen by another family, you may not feel like you should be grieving, and many of your friends may not recognize or understand your grief.

Unattended grief may manifest itself in destructive behaviors, self-medication, anger, or denial. Children and young people, especially those in foster care, need help labeling their feelings and understanding when their struggles are expressions of grief. Even experienced child welfare workers and therapists who do not specialize in adoption may not understand the relationship between loss and grief that is experienced by members of the triad. To assist children and adults who are dealing with adoption-related grief, the importance of knowledgeable caseworkers and adoption-competent therapists cannot be overstated.

For information to help your child deal with grief and loss, visit Information Gateway's Helping Adopted Children Cope With Grief and Loss webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/helping/>).

To read about adoptive parents' experiences helping their children heal from grief, visit the North American Council on Adoptable Children website (<https://www.nacac.org/resource/helping-children-recover-from-grief/>).

To cope with grief, help is available through professional therapists who have significant experience with adoption and bereavement. These professionals understand that adoption-related grief looks and behaves differently from other kinds of grief. Referrals for therapists may come from friends, support groups, or the adoption agency or attorney who helped with your adoption. For more information, refer to Information Gateway's *Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-therapist/>).

IDENTITY

As a life-altering event, adoption affects the identities of all those involved. If you were adopted, you may have experienced adoption-related identity issues throughout your life, especially around milestones such as birthdays, holidays, births, and deaths. You may see your identity as incomplete, unsteady, or contradictory. Your birth parents are your parents, but they aren't parenting you. You were born into one family and adopted into another.

If you were adopted and lack genetic, medical, religious, and other historical information about your birth family, you may want answers to questions that would help form your identity, such as why your birth parents placed you for adoption, what became of those parents, whether you have siblings, and whether you resemble your birth parents or extended family of origin in appearance or in other characteristics. You may struggle to find answers to these questions and may feel out of place or as if you don't belong in your

adoptive family. Having access to genetic and health information is critically important in terms of wellness.

Adoptive parents and birth parents may be uncertain about their identities and roles in a child's life. Adoptive parents may not feel like "real" parents or like they are entitled to be parents, and birth parents may be unsure of their role in their child's life since they are not actively parenting that child. These identity issues may change over time due to various factors, such as formal changes to the level of ongoing contact between adoptive and birth families or the wishes of the child who was adopted. These feelings can also come up during the search and reunion process. For more information, visit Information Gateway's Ongoing Contact With Birth Families in Adoption webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adoptive/before-adoption/openness/>).

"Lifebooks" can help children and young people who were adopted better understand themselves and their identity within their adoptive family. For more on these books, visit Information Gateway's Lifebooks webpage (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/lifebooks/>).

Due to adoption-related identity issues, it may be hard for parents and people who were adopted to talk about adoption with others, including their own families.

Identity formation begins in childhood and becomes more important during the teenage years. Gaps in identity and lack of access to individuals and information may be more pronounced when a child starts school or has a family-oriented classroom assignment (e.g., creating a family tree). For more information and resources, visit the following Information Gateway webpages:

- Talking About Adoption
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/talking/>)
- Adoption and School
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/school/>)

For more information about identity issues, including support for those who were adopted and education for adoptive parents, visit the Pact website (<http://www.pactadopt.org/resources/identity-issues.html>).

INTIMACY

People who were adopted may be challenged by intimacy or becoming close to others due to losses resulting from adoption. They may subconsciously try to avoid experiencing a new loss by keeping an emotional distance from or not committing to someone else. Intimacy or attachment may be difficult for members of the triad due to related feelings of rejection, shame, grief, and uncertainty about identity. Attachment issues can occur when a secure, emotional bond formed between a child and a parent is disrupted. Involvement with adoption may affect your ability to form healthy attachments, making it more difficult to trust and to form meaningful relationships throughout life.

Adoptive and birth parents may also experience intimacy-related difficulties. If you are a birth parent, sex, pregnancy, and closeness to others may be emotionally painful. Birth parents may be especially reluctant to form relationships with family or children who later come into their lives.

The intimate relationship of the adoptive parents may have been hurt by the inability to conceive. This may shape the couple's relationship and affect the family dynamic into which they bring an adopted child. If you are an adoptive parent, you may struggle to help your child who is also experiencing attachment issues. Attachment challenges range from difficulties relating to others to severe social-functioning disorders. Appropriate treatments can help parents nurture secure attachments and cope with behaviors that may result from earlier attachment disruptions.

For more information about helping children form attachments, visit the AdoptUSKids website (<https://www.adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/how-to-adopt-and-foster/receiving-a-placement/forming-attachments>).

MASTERY AND CONTROL

Adoption requires birth parents, adoptive parents, and people who were adopted to give up some sense of control. For birth parents who experience an unplanned pregnancy or become unable to care for their child, neglect or abuse may result, and a dire situation may be resolved through adoption. Relinquishing your parental rights or having your child enter foster care can lead to feelings of victimization and powerlessness that may continue to affect your life and identity.

If you were adopted, you may have not been involved in the decisions that led to adoption, especially if the adoption occurred when you were an infant or young child. Adults made life-altering choices for you that were out of your control. These decisions may have hindered your growth toward self-actualization and self-control and led to a lowered sense of self-responsibility. Teens and older youth who were adopted frequently engage in power struggles with adoptive parents and other authority figures (e.g., teachers, coaches, counselors). Such behavior may be an attempt to regain the loss of control experienced in adoption.

For an adoptive parent, the adoption process can be cumbersome and may lead to feelings of helplessness. You may view yourself as powerless or unworthy of being a parent, which can lead to a less engaged parenting style. Conversely, you may try to regain the control lost by becoming strict, overprotective, and domineering. This can cause the relationship with your child to become inflexible and result in additional tension. For information on this topic, refer to Information Gateway's *Parenting Your Adopted Teenager* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-teenager/>).

Refer to the following Information Gateway resources for additional information on adoption support and parenting your adopted child:

- *Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services* [factsheet] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoption/>)

- *Parenting After Adoption* [webpage] (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/>)

Building Resilience to Regain a Sense of Control

Resilience can help all members of the adoption triad regain a sense of control. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), resilience is the ability to adapt or cope in a positive way to adversity, including trauma, tragedy, threats, and significant stress. If you were adopted, resilience can help you thrive despite the accompanying grief, rejection, guilt, and shame you may have experienced or will experience at different times in your life. Resilience involves behaviors, thoughts, and actions that can be learned over time and nurtured through positive and healthy relationships with other adults, parents, or caregivers. For general information on resilience, including ways to build it, visit the APA website (<https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>).

For adoptive parents, building your resilience can help support your child's resilience and improve your family's long-term well-being. For ways to help children build resilience, refer to Information Gateway's *Building Resilience in Children and Teens* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/resilience_ts_2019.pdf) or visit the APA website (<https://www.apa.org/topics/parenting/resilience-tip-tool>).

CONCLUSION

Adoption often marks the joyous beginning of a new family embarking on a rich journey together. Adoption often marks an ending, as well, and the separation of children from their parents and families of origin. Even in the most ideal circumstances where some level of ongoing contact continues with extended family members, adoption-related issues will likely arise at different points in the lives of people who were adopted and their birth or adoptive parents. A willingness to learn about these issues and seek support if necessary can help ensure that parents and those who were adopted experience happy and healthy family lives.

RESOURCES

Child Welfare Information Gateway. This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications on a wide range of adoption topics.

- Adoption Materials for Specific Audiences (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro/adoption-materials/>)
- Adoption Options: Where Do I Start? (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-adoptoption/>)
- For Adopted People (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/>)
- For Expectant Parents Considering Adoption and Birth Parents (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/>)
- Helping Your Adopted Children Maintain Important Relationships With Family (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-maintainrelationships/>)

- Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents and Relatives (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/preplacement/working-parents-families/impacts/>)
- Lifelong Impact of Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/impact/>)
- Maintaining Connections After Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/connections/>)
- Parenting Your Adopted Preschooler (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/preschool/>)
- Parenting Your Adopted School-Age Child (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/parent-school-age/>)
- Understanding the Emotional Impact of Adoption (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/emotional-impact/>)

Adoption Exchange. The Adoption Exchange provides expertise and support before, during, and after the adoption process. It also provides educational support nationally to adoptive families. (<http://www.adoptex.org>)

AdoptUSKids. This national project of the Children's Bureau provides information on subsidies, services, and training to help parents and children or youth throughout the adoption process. It also features adoption stories from families that describe the challenges and lessons they have learned. (<https://www.adoptuskids.org/>)

American Adoption Congress. This nonprofit membership organization provides education, advocacy, and support for all families touched by adoption. (<http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/>)

Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.). The C.A.S.E. website includes information on adoption-competent therapy, adoption training, and community education. It also offers publications, including the *W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook*, which empowers adopted children to answer questions about adoption if, when, and how they choose. (<http://adoptionssupport.org/>)

Families Adopting in Response (FAIR). FAIR is an all-volunteer organization that offers information, education, support, and fellowship to adoptive and preadoptive families. Members include families who have adopted children through public and private agencies from the United States and from many other countries. (<http://www.fairfamilies.org>)

Institute for Human Services. The Institute for Human Services provides child welfare training and offers a number of resources to support parents who foster and adopt children from the child welfare system. (<http://www.ihs-trainet.com/>)

North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC). NACAC, founded by adoptive parents, supports, educates, and empowers adoptive parents and children or youth who were adopted. It also provides training for parents and youth to create, develop, and enhance support networks. (<https://www.nacac.org/>)

Pact, an Adoption Alliance. Pact offers a comprehensive site addressing issues for adopted children of color, offering informative articles on related topics as well as family profiles, links to other resources, and a reference guide with a searchable database. (<http://www.pactadopt.org/>)

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