

## Adoption and the Schools

Children who are adopted or live in kinship or foster care bring with them an additional history and set of experiences when they enter the classroom. Part of that history includes many unknowns. No parent, child, or teacher would ever choose a public place like school to be a source of misunderstanding, misinformation, embarrassment, or pain for a child. Unfortunately, thoughtless remarks and exclusive assignments cause hurt feelings, tearful homework battles, confusion, and sleepless nights for many adopted and foster children and their families. Some of the common assignments that present a challenge to these children are family history projects, providing baby pictures, writing autobiographies, making family trees, genetic analyses, and student of the week displays. Sometimes first-time adoptive parents have been taken by surprise (as described in the story about David on page 2) and haven't known how to be proactive or how to avoid the pain these assignments can bring.

Many children who are adopted or in foster care don't have the information needed, or the life experiences that fit neatly into the model of a traditional family tree. Adoptive and foster parents across the country do not necessarily want teachers to stop giving assignments that examine the family unit, they simply want more variety and alternatives to the "one family fits all" format for many of these assignments. As all parents do, foster and adoptive parents want their child to fit in and to be included. Blended families who have united after divorce or the death of a spouse, single, step, and same gender parents also want the same consideration. Besides providing alternative models for the above assignments, it is absolutely crucial for educators to model positive language to appropriately name and describe various aspects of adoption. Using positive language means choosing words that show respect for birth parents, adoptive and foster parents, and adopted children. (See the inserted chart *Positive Adoption Language*.)

Adopted children often have unanswered questions about their origin and experience pain due to the loss of their birth parents, even if they are happy and thriving in their adoptive families. These feelings of loss are normal and often become more intense at various developmental ages, such as during pre-teen and teenage years. The additional pressure children feel if they have to deliver, display, or present an assignment that accentuates how they are different in front of their peers can magnify those losses.

Leah O'Leary, executive director of A Red Thread Adoption Services Inc., in Massachusetts says, "I believe kids today are extremely vulnerable in school situations, especially in any area where they feel different from other kids. Adoption is just one way in which kids can feel different because of antiquated attitudes and bias. Simple school assignments such as baby pictures, family trees and cultural heritage can raise questions and uncertainties for teachers and children alike." ([www.celebrateadoption.org](http://www.celebrateadoption.org))

This fact sheet will:

- inform parent group members of some successful educational efforts achieved by parent groups across the country, and offer tips for how your parent group might affect a school system.
- provide parents with advocacy survival tips on behalf of their school-aged adopted children and children in foster or kinship care.
- provide examples of alternatives for problematic school assignments (handouts enclosed).

## *Parents as Leaders*

Parents and parent groups can make a tremendous impact on how teachers, schools, and educational systems treat the individual child and the subjects of foster and kinship care and adoption. Not all school administrators or teachers are equally informed about adoption, and because of this, adoptive parents are often the ones who take the lead to educate the educators. Parents do not need to give all the personal and detailed descriptions of their child's past, but information that will help the teacher provide a more nurturing, inclusive, and thoughtfully structured learning environment is important to all concerned.

Lois Melina, author of *Raising Adopted Children*, believes parents should inform teachers and other professionals who provide services to their children. She writes [p. 87]:

...I realized that a child's adoptive status is part of his social history and that schools need to know the social histories of their students. At the same time, parents should not expect that teachers or administrators are informed enough about adoption to know when it may be an issue for a child. So, at the same time that we inform the teacher of our child's adoptive status, we should also take a few moments to ask if the teacher has any classroom assignments coming up that deal with families or genetics. We should discuss with the teacher how he plans to handle those assignments in such a way that our child is able to complete them without being singled out as an "exception". In many cases, when children are given enough flexibility, they can come up with their own creative and insightful ways of completing the assignment so they satisfy the teacher while maintaining a sense of privacy and control.

Doug Lewis, an adoptive parent from Michigan Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (MFAPA), has been fortunate with his children and their school experiences: "I tend to head things off at the beginning of the year and explain the situation with my children. I tell

An adoptive father in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was concerned when his son David\* was asked to bring a baby picture to school for a class project. "David joined our family as a six-year-old, first as a foster child and later we adopted him. His third grade teacher asked each child to bring a baby picture so students could try to guess which person matched each baby picture. We didn't have any baby pictures or childhood pictures at all before age six, and I worried about his feelings through this whole thing. I wish I could have warned the teacher ahead of time, but I didn't see it coming," said the father. Then he added, "We found a picture in a magazine that looked like what David might have looked like, and spiffed it up with some cool backing paper. David knew it wasn't him, though."

\*name has been changed

the teachers the trouble spots with some kinds of assignments." Although unforeseeable situations can arise, Doug believes "it's better to deal with the issues before there is a problem than after." Doug adds, "I've personally never met a teacher who didn't care about one of my children and want to spare them pain or embarrassment."

Parents know their children better than anyone else and should follow their instincts about how to be the best advocate. One parent might initially tell the teacher that her child is adopted and forewarn the teacher about assignments that might be impossible or painful for her child to complete—then back off to let the child take the lead unless problems arise. Another parent, perhaps one with a child who has significant special needs, might want to set up regular check-in meetings with the teacher throughout the year.

## *Parent Groups Making an Impact on Schools*

Parent groups all across North America are making an impact on how schools treat the subjects of adoption, foster care, and kinship care. Parents in these groups know this topic affects the deepest sense of self in their children. Other groups can use their resources and learn from their experiences.

### **Baltimore, Maryland**

Jennifer Klotz, a longtime trainer on adoption and the schools from the Center for Adoptive Families in Baltimore, Maryland, helped develop and has provided

adoption awareness training in the Baltimore and Washington area schools since 1993. She says her group has continued to be successful with training because they remain flexible and have expanded their curriculum to include foster and kinship families into the scope of their training. The number of foster and kinship families has increased in the Baltimore and Washington area and has heightened the awareness of families that are built in non-traditional ways. “It’s odd,” she says, “but if I just mention adoption, sometimes administrators say they don’t have any adopted children in their school (whether it’s true or not) and therefore they feel there’s no need for training. But no one can ignore the rise in kinship and foster children attending our area schools, and now they welcome our presence. We do whatever it takes to increase adoption awareness.”

Jennifer adds, “Our training presentations range from 10 minutes to two hours depending on the time that is available to us. Some audiences—especially where there are high concentrations of children in adoptive, foster, and kinship families—want even more time from us.” Jennifer also said that in addition to providing handouts on positive adoption language and difficult assignments, she always tells teachers to do the following three things:

- Mention adoption—If teachers mention every other kind of family but neglect to mention adoption, an adopted child will feel shame and embarrassment.
- Have at least one book on adoption in every primary classroom.

This fact sheet is the third of a series produced by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) through an Adoption Opportunities grant (#90CO0913) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Children’s Bureau. We encourage you to reproduce and distribute this fact sheet. Under this grant, NACAC operates the Adoptive Parent Leadership Network to offer resources and support to adoptive parent groups. For more information, contact:

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- If a child tells you he or she is adopted all you need to say is—“What a wonderful way to build a family!”—and leave it at that.

One of the keys to the success of the Center for Adoptive Families’ adoption awareness program has been targeting guidance counselors. Jennifer elaborates, “We have developed a good rapport with many of our schools’ guidance counselors and it has opened doors to get us on the agenda for staff meetings. Some principals now pull us in to train staff on a regular basis and also when specific adoption issues come up. There are schools that invite us to come every other year because new staff have been hired and need the awareness training.” The Center for Adoptive Families has also learned that simple bulleted handouts limited to no more than 5 to 10 pages are the most helpful to teachers. Their book, *Adoption Awareness in Our Schools: A Training Manual*, is available for purchase.

### Tucson, Arizona

The Arizona’s Children Association received a grant from Casey Family Programs to develop a teacher training kit that focuses on family diversity with an emphasis on adoption. They created a video and training manual to train guidance counselors on the school-related issues for foster, adopted, and kinship care students. The idea for training school counselors was that the counselors can then train the teaching staff. The video and curriculum guide can be kept in the library for further use or as new teachers join the staff.

Anna Loebe, from Post Adoptive Families Together in Tucson, Arizona, also used the curriculum and video when she was an instructor in the College of Education at the University of Arizona. “The video made a tremendous impact on the student teachers. Many of them had never thought about adoption and had no clue of the impact insensitive curriculum could have on children who were adopted. The students were quite receptive and in strong support of the information they learned. Many of them were surprised they had never been made aware of this issue before.” says Anna.

Anna was especially excited to be able to use Arizona’s Children Association’s curriculum with teachers before they started teaching. “I wanted to reach teachers before they began their careers and help them understand a more

*continued on page 6*

**W**hile parent groups promote change within a school system, most parents will also want to advocate for their child's individual needs. The following two pages offer tips for how parents can support the learning needs of their children

### *Strategies for Parents to Use as Educational Advocates for their Children*

- **Be prepared.** Before school starts, think about what you and your child need to talk about so that he can respond to issues that may be raised at school. Give your child the tools he needs to respond to comments from classmates. Be prepared to respond to difficult situations that may arise.
- **Be proactive.** If you want it known that your child is adopted, inform each new teacher. Meet with the teacher at the beginning of the school year. Use your judgment about how much history is appropriate to share. It is not necessary to share personal details about your child's history, but general information can be important to help get the year off to a good start. For example, if your child has experienced multiple moves it might help to explain to the teacher that your child might need extra support during transitions, such as between classes, before vacations, and at the end of the year.
- **Be an educator.** Provide teachers and administrators with positive adoption language, as well as an explanation of why it is important to use positive language. If adults in your child's school present adoption in a positive light, it will help students see it that way as well. Provide a list or donate books or movies that have positive adoption themes to the school library or your child's classroom.
- **Be realistic.** Remember that teachers are responsible for working with a classroom of children. Certainly the teacher will work to meet your child's individual needs, but at the same time that teacher is teaching a community of learners, each one having important needs too.
- **Define success.** Children develop at their own pace, sometimes excelling with high academic achievement and sometimes struggling to achieve at grade level. Be open to highs, lows, and plateaus in learning, and be prepared to support your child through all three stages. Be clear about how you and your child will define success and look for ways to celebrate that success.
- **Be an advocate.** Find out about the services that your child may be entitled to, including special education services, one-to-one or small group help from paraprofessionals, and other tutoring possibilities.
- **Be supportive.** Let your child know that you are there for her, and that you want her to enjoy school. Also make it clear that you will work with her school to increase the appropriateness of assignments, educate teachers on adoption issues, and be available to explain adoption to classmates and other families, if desired. In addition to being a strong supporter for your child at school, be sure that she knows that she can talk to you if she feels embarrassed, hurt, joyous, or confused about having been adopted.
- **Work as a team.** Establish a partnership with your child's teacher, counselor, social worker, and principal. Naturally you will be working closely with the classroom teacher, but use all available adult resources. Sometimes an adult outside the classroom can effectively help a child solve problems. A counselor or social worker can track progress through the years and help ensure consistent support from grade to grade.
- **Continue to learn.** As you live and grow with your children, new information is often revealed to you. For example, sometimes suspicions of past abuse and neglect in older adopted children may be revealed as truth. Possibly symptoms such as the characteristics of fetal alcohol syndrome or effects become evident with time in children with complicated pasts. It will be helpful to read and seek information about your growing concerns and alert the school if you feel the newly revealed information may affect your child's performance in school.
- **Join a parent support group.** If you have drifted from a group, either re-connect or find another one that suits your needs. Who better than other adoptive, kinship, and foster parents to support you as you advocate for your child in school? Use the group as a safe place to talk out school concerns and solicit help from the group. Bring a friend or group member with you to school meetings if you need support talking to teachers and working through difficult issues.
- **Plan for the future.** If you sense that your child might be moving into a difficult age, check ahead to see if there are teachers in the upcoming grade level who understand adoption. A teacher who was adopted, has adopted children, or is gifted working with adopted children or children with special needs may be the mentor your child needs. Make an administrative request to have your child placed in such a teacher's room.

## *Advocating for Children Who Have Special Needs*

In “Adoption and School Issues,” the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse reports that adopted children may be more likely than nonadopted children to have a learning disability. Although there are no known causes, there are theories for why this might be true:

- One theory points to the genetic component: that parents who choose to relinquish parental rights may also be more likely to have a learning disability.
- A detrimental prenatal environment that may have included alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, or poor nutrition is certainly a risk factor for learning problems.
- An abusive or neglectful early relationship with a birth parent could cause emotional and neurological damage that in turn could produce learning disabilities.
- Another possible reason why more adopted children are diagnosed with disabilities is that their parents may tend to be overly observant and seek professional help right away.

Whatever the reasons for a learning disability diagnosis, many adoptive parents become the educational advocates for their children with special learning needs.

Parents must first request a special needs assessment from their child’s school. Once parents have signed the papers to initiate the referral, federal law requires the school district to make the assessment within a “reasonable amount of time.” This time limit varies from state to state. (In Minnesota, for example, districts allow 30 school days.) Likewise, each province in Canada may vary somewhat on the allowed time. Check with your state or provincial education department for the guidelines in your area and learn about your child’s and your parental rights.

After a referral, an assessment team will come together and begin to evaluate the needs of the child. This team can include all or some of the following people: principal, psychologist, counselor, social worker, special education teacher, classroom teacher, speech pathologist, and physical therapist. Depending on the needs of the child, members of this team will administer appropriate standardized tests to obtain a measurable result. One of the members of this team will also interview the parents to get background information and discuss the child’s medical history.

If the child qualifies for special needs services, the parents and a team of specialists will determine the

Individualized Educational Plan or IEP for a child. The IEP can include a combination of academic, physical, social, and emotional goals that best meet the current needs of the child. The IEP is reviewed throughout the year by parents, the classroom teacher, and the team of specialists, and goals are continually evaluated.

Goals initially set too high may be made more realistic if the child becomes too frustrated and the outcome seems unattainable. Goals may also be upgraded and made more challenging when the child meets a desired outcome earlier than expected. If a child is older and received services from another state or country, the new school district may require an update on testing to make sure the IEP goals for the child are an accurate reflection of the child’s current needs.

All goals are in some way measurable so the child and parents can see when progress is made. Parents are an important part of this team and are the true experts regarding their child. They carry the knowledge of their children’s histories, and witness daily the courage, strengths, and struggles inherent in their lives.

### **Questions for Parents to Ask Regarding Special Needs Services**

- How will my child benefit by receiving special needs services?
- What academic, physical, social, and emotional concerns do the teachers and I have regarding my child?
- What kinds of tests will be administered to determine whether or not my child qualifies for services?
- What kind of help will my child receive? How often? From whom? In what way?
- How will my child’s school day schedule be affected in order to receive help?
- How will special needs services affect my child’s learning time with peers?
- Will we also discuss my child’s strengths and abilities, as well as concerns?
- What areas of learning will be focused on and how will growth be measured?
- How will we be involved in the IEP plan?
- How will we all know when progress is made?
- What will be expected at home and at school?
- How will we know if things are going well or not?
- How might the IEP change over time? ◇

## *Impact on Schools* (continued from page 3)

inclusive way of viewing the family unit. I wanted to catch them before they unknowingly left any child out.”

Arizona’s Children Association’s teacher training kit includes a 20-minute video, a 40-page workbook with easy-to-use curriculum for individual and group training, a computer disk for handout reproduction, and examples of alternative assignments. Purchasing this kit might be a more viable alternative for a parent group than seeking a grant to produce similar materials.

### **Palo Alto, California**

In 2001, Families Adopting in Response (FAIR) in Palo Alto, California, published *Adoption and the Schools*, a resource manual for parents and teachers. It is a 250-page manual which was funded by a NACAC mini-grant. The book, written by Lansing Wood and Nancy Ng, includes:

- the history of adoption
- school presentation suggestions
- a child’s understanding of adoption at different stages of development
- special education challenges
- children’s written and artistic expressions
- parent-teacher communication
- resource list
- solutions to problem assignments

This manual offers adapted assignment examples for teachers, some of which are enclosed within this fact sheet. It also contains excellent articles on all aspects of adoption, written by social workers, child development specialists, psychologists, and parents. This comprehensive resource would be valuable for any school counselor to have and share with staff. Parents and teachers are encouraged to copy articles and assignment examples from the book to hand out at parent/teacher conferences and staff development meetings. FAIR also has a 45-minute videotape entitled *I Wonder...* in which teenagers talk about being adopted, suitable for middle and high schools.

### **Pittsford, New York**

In its quest to create training materials to train teachers on the issues of adoption, Adoption Resource Network, Inc. (ARNI) in Pittsford, New York, pulled together a team of experts that included an adoptive parent, a psychologist, a teacher, and a school administrator to write the curriculum and design an educational program.

“When we had everything ready, we approached the superintendent, but were told the school district already had more curriculum than they could cover and they didn’t have the time for it,” said Lisa Maynard, program director at ARNI.

ARNI’s vision and work were admirable but they couldn’t penetrate the system the way they had originally hoped. They did, however, continue their educational efforts on a smaller but equally important scale. Lisa and other parents from the group have had continual success talking to individual classrooms about adoption. Lisa’s work in a single classroom often expands, across the entire grade level and beyond, when teachers witness for themselves the excellent, helpful information she provides to students and teachers.

Lisa regrets the superintendent’s refusal to allow them to train all teachers district wide, but concedes that over time, “we have taught a lot of children and expanded the

Eleven-year-old Alex Maynard, attending fifth grade in the Pittsford School District in New York, came home one day with an assignment. “Mom, we’re studying immigration and I need a passport and have to dress up like an immigrant.” Alex’s mother, Lisa Maynard, program director at Adoption Resource Network, Inc., was thrilled with the assignment. Alex had emigrated from Korea at 3½ months old when he joined the Maynard family through adoption in 1987. “This is great.” said Lisa, “You’ve got your passport and the clothes you wore when you came on the plane from Korea. “No, you don’t get it,” answered Alex. “We have to make our passport and the teachers want everyone to dress up like they came from England.”

Lisa was disappointed that the teachers thought it would be easier if all the students came from the same country. Although Alex was supposed to pretend he came from England, Lisa talked to her son and he agreed that he would much rather bring his official passport and the clothes he wore when he made his journey from Korea to New York. Alex was then allowed to participate as a living example of immigration.

thinking of many teachers. The importance of this topic is revealed when the teachers see the enthusiasm of the children and hear their insightful questions.” Lisa added, “Lately it has been interesting speaking to junior and senior high school classes. Inevitably a student hangs around after class, thanks me for coming and then casually confides that he or she is adopted. These students tend to be children who are adopted in a family of the same race, and often others around them aren’t aware they are adopted. They are grateful that someone is taking the time to talk about adoption in school.”

### *Ways for Parent Groups to Effect Change in Schools*

- **Volunteer to speak to classes and grade levels.** Do not discount the impact of the intimate relationship that develops when a parent from the community speaks to an individual class or grade level in a local school. Each child internalizes what she has learned and becomes an automatic teacher to others. Children take a special interest in speakers who not only have first hand knowledge of a subject, but also live in their community. It helps to build a broader sense of community within a school when local experts share their talents. Some parents present in their own child’s classroom and others trade off in order to not train in their child’s room. Let your children guide you regarding their comfort level with having you present in their classroom.
- **Familiarize yourself with high quality published materials.** It is not necessary for all parent groups to develop their own curriculum or training manuals. Good materials already exist. Using quality materials published by other groups is a more efficient use of time and money. When parent groups share with each other, it allows all groups more freedom to expand their focus to other areas of outreach.
- **Develop a lending library.** Apply for a grant to help your group gather and organize books on the topics of adoption, foster care, and kinship care and begin to develop a lending library for community members including school personnel. Your group could organize a birthday party celebrating your first parent group meeting. Every member or family could bring a book on adoption to either use for your lending library or to donate to the school in honor of the group or adoption.

- **Target guidance counselors.** Guidance counselors have more flexibility in their day to attend training workshops than classroom teachers. They can use what they learn and teach it to an entire school staff. Counselors can efficiently use budgeted money to purchase an adoption curriculum, videos, practical lesson plans, and assignment examples to keep in a central location for all staff to share.
- **Network beyond your local school.** If you or your group has helped to make improvements within your child’s school, talk to your school’s guidance counselor or your most supportive teachers to try to get names of teachers and administrators from other schools. You will need contact names to get into another school or district. If a teacher or counselor who has benefited from your work makes a recommendation, you will have a better chance of getting into another school. Remember you don’t have to do this alone. You can call upon all willing members of your parent support group.

*“The adopted child knows he belongs when the reality of his life is reflected in the culture of the classroom.”*

*FAIR’s Adoption and the Schools*

- **See teachers as team members instead of enemies.** Due to ignorance and outdated lessons, some teachers have given insensitive assignments to students and as a result parents have become defensive. At the same time, there are teachers who are well informed about adoption. In fact, some teachers were adopted or are adoptive parents who:
  - informally network to keep the rest of the staff current on adoption issues
  - continually advocate for the needs of adopted and foster children

- let parents know they understand adoption issues and can be a resource
- encourage parents and the principal to place adopted children in their classes

Seek out these teachers or find the most likely candidates to support your cause and ask them to come to one of your parent group meetings. Work together as a team to build a network of supportive adults for the entire school.

- **Keep it simple.** Don't expect a teacher or grade level to teach an entire adoption curriculum. Teachers are given twice as much curriculum than can be covered in a year for each subject they teach. Dumping a thick volume on their laps will only overwhelm and frustrate them. Simple bulleted handouts—with clear, concise information—are not only more manageable for teachers, they are more practical and useful. Examples of more appropriate family assignments are welcome gems and will likely be used.
- **Look for opportunities with student teachers.** Your parent group could make an impact on the teacher training process. Most schools use student teachers periodically throughout the year. Find out how to contact the student teacher supervisor(s) at local colleges or universities. Form a panel of adoptive parents and possibly children who have been adopted, and offer to present a panel discussion for student teachers. If the college isn't receptive to adoption alone as a subject, broaden your focus to include foster and kinship care representatives as well. If forming a panel is out of the question, try to get a copy or have the college purchase a copy of Arizona's Children Association's video on adoption. Provide student teachers with easy-to-use assignment handouts. Once your group has an inroad to the college, you will reach teachers before they begin their career.
- **Sponsor a booth at a regional or state educational association convention.** Share your knowledge and expertise beyond your local boundaries. It can be energizing to meet others who are willing to immediately take up your cause, and sometimes it takes broadening your boundaries to find these people. ✧

## Resources

Arizona's Children Association's training kits, entitled, *Family Diversity in the Classroom: The Adopted Child*, are available for \$60.00. Contact:

Arizona's Children Association  
2700 South 8th Avenue  
Tucson, AZ 85713  
800-947-7611

Center for Adoptive Families' training manual, *Adoption Awareness in Our Schools: A Training Curriculum*, is available for \$25.00. Contact:

Center for Adoptive Families  
5750 Executive Dr., Suite 107  
Baltimore, MD 21228  
410-869-0620 or 301-439-2900  
caf@adoptionstogether.org  
www.centerforadoptivefamilies.org

FAIR's *Adoption and the Schools* manual can be ordered for \$25.00 plus \$5.00 shipping and handling. The video *I Wonder...* can be ordered for \$32.50 plus \$5.00 shipping and handling. Contact:

Families Adopting In Response  
P.O. Box 51436  
Palo Alto, CA 94303  
650-328-6832  
info@fairfamilies.org • www.fairfamilies.org

Staff from ARNI are available to answer questions about adoption and the schools. Contact:

Adoption Resource Network, Inc.  
P.O. Box 178  
Pittsford, NY 14534  
716-586-9586  
info@arni.org • www.arni.org

## Web Sites for More Information

**Center for Adoption Support and Education:** [www.adoptionssupport.org/safe.html](http://www.adoptionssupport.org/safe.html) (provides information on school support for adoptive parents and educators)

**LD Online:** [www.ldonline.com](http://www.ldonline.com) (provides information on learning disabilities and IEPs. etc.)

**National Adoption Information Clearinghouse:** [www.calib.com/naic](http://www.calib.com/naic) (contains information on all aspects of adoption)

**National Information Center for Children and**