

Adoption 101 for DMH Case Managers

Adoptive Families have great strengths and are meant to be families forever.

The work of all professionals is to support and strengthen the child and the family and to keep them connected and integrated as a family.

Overview

- Adoption can be a positive way to create a family, although adoption is sometimes presented as an adversarial relationship between birth family and adoptive family.
- Parents – and oftentimes professionals – do not fully understand underlying systemic challenges and the dysfunction that these challenges will cause the child if he/she is placed in this adversarial arena.
- Professionals, including therapists, can normalize and demystify the process of adoption for those involved.

Introduction to Adoption

Adoption is the social, emotional, and legal process in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family, while maintaining genetic, emotional, and psychological connections to their birth family. Adoption has many facets and touches people in different ways, depending on their role and perspective.

[History of adoption practices](#) (link)

Adoption is a *lifelong* process

The legal event of adoption is only the beginning of a dynamic process in which all parties to the adoption—parent(s) by birth and by adoption, child, other family members, and the community—interact to create a new **family constellation**. As these parties change over time, this process is repeated again and again so that the family constellation is shaped and re-shaped in response. Adoption is an ongoing factor in this process.

The Basics: Language Matters

Adoption: a legal event and a lifelong process for all involved
Birth Family: the family the child is born to and genetically connected to
Pre-Adoptive Family: the preferred term (to show commitment) for the family legally fostering the child until the adoption is finalized
Adoptive Family: the family that adopts the child; referred to as his/her family unless discerning between birth and adoptive. *Siblings are another complex part of the family: are they the birth siblings or half siblings in the adoptive family; are they the birth siblings or half siblings in the birth families; are they siblings in the adoptive family who were also adopted? We don't always have language to define these siblings.*
Disruption: the breakdown of adoptive placement prior to legalization, requiring return of child to agency custody
Dissolution: the legal termination of adoption, relinquishment of parental rights and return of the child to agency custody

Knowing the right words can help people who live in adoption to feel that you are sensitive to them.

*Ask the family what their **own** language is for these things as well. Ask the family to help to educate you.*

[Glossary](#) (link)

Assessment: The Story Matters

Every person has a story. Understanding the story or the narrative is vital to understanding the child.

Adoption is not a single event; it is a life-long process that follows a person through his/her life

There are *at least* two journeys taken in the process of adoption: the journey of the birth family and the child's life with them, however brief, and the journey of the adoptive family and the child's life with them. Adoption is the melding of two or more stories and two or more journeys for the adopted child. It is important to know how to talk about those journeys and stories to gather the important information that we need to assess and care for the *whole* child. Our concerns as professionals are often more about what happened *prior* to adoption. **The Story begins at the beginning!**

The Family of Adoption: Who is the family you are treating?

How was the family formed?	Some Reasons for Adoption on the part of the birthparent	Why did the family choose adoption? (adoptive parent story)	For both families - by birth and by adoption - know about the family history of:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children by birth • By remarriage • By kinship • By guardianship • By Donor • By Adoption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too young; Not ready to parent • No family support • War • Violence • Poverty • Child trafficking • Removed -Care and Protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To build a family • To rescue a child • God's work • Infertility • Empathy, having been traumatized as a child oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental Illness • Substance Abuse • Medical • Genetic • Developmental Issues

Trauma, Loss, and Interpersonal Relationships

- Presence/absence of trauma and loss
- Removal from birth family, country of origin, foster families, etc.
- The adoption itself may be viewed as trauma/loss
- Loss of 'role' for birth family
- Losses inherent in infertility
- Other trauma: sexual/physical abuse and/or neglect
- Successful attachment with adoptive parents and siblings
- Attachment challenges with adoptive parents and siblings
- Difficulty with life transitions
- Sensory Integration Issues
- Life Span issues

Losses in Adoption

Overt Loss: the loss of attachment figures, home, neighborhood, school, pets, and possessions

Covert Loss: the emotional and behavioral ramifications of neglect, abandonment, and rejection, most often recognized as low self-esteem

Status Loss: looking and feeling different from others and experiencing stigma as a result of that difference

Core Issues in Adoption

loss
 rejection
 guilt/shame
 grief
 identity
 intimacy
 control

Further reading

- [Unnecessary Losses](#): what relationships need in order to be preserved (link)
- [Normative Crisis](#) (link)
- [Attachment](#) (link)
- [Core issues in adoption](#) (link)

Dos and Don'ts in Working with Adoptive Families

DO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen non-judgmentally to all parents • Honor the child's past • Involve the parents in every phase of treatment • Focus on family strengths • Work to strengthen attachments • Maintain a family-focused approach to treatment • Work to strengthen community networks • Encourage helpful dialogue about adoption among family members • Seek good supervision and support for yourself by a competent adoption supervisor
DON'T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume adoption is the root cause of all of the family problems • Assume adoption has nothing to do with the family problems • Assume adoptive families are just like biologically-created families • Try to "rescue" the child • Blame the parents (birth or adoptive)