

Adoption/Foster Care fact sheet For K-12 Teachers

An introduction to foster care and adoption for educators, for inclusive and trauma-informed classrooms

Educators can have a significant impact on long-term outcomes for adopted/foster children. School engagement is one of the best predictors of lifelong wellbeing, so it is vital that our classrooms are environments where students thrive. To effectively educate adopted/foster students in our classrooms, educators can:

- (1) **gather** knowledge about the basics of the foster care and adoption systems,
- (2) **understand** myths, facts and challenges related to educating adopted/foster students,
- (3) **build strong relationships** with these students based on trust and communication,
- (4) **create safe, trauma-informed classrooms**, and
- (5) **appropriately address adoption** in the classroom and in the curriculum.

How much do educators know about foster and adopted youth?

A 2021 study conducted by the Rudd Adoption Research Program on teachers' perceptions of adopted youth found the following:

- Teachers often learn that a child is adopted from the child, rather than the child's parents.
- **2.4%** of teachers said that based on their education/training they felt "very prepared" to work with adopted students and families, with 24% feeling somewhat prepared.
- **45%** had at some point wanted to know more about a child's adoptive status or history but were unsure of how or who to ask.
- **67%** viewed adopted children as more likely (than non-adopted children) to have emotional difficulties, while half believed adopted children have more peer/social problems and struggle more with identity issues.
- **75%** felt that their school at least somewhat emphasized or acknowledged family diversity. Yet only about half felt that staff were at least somewhat trained to recognize the role of trauma or attachment history in children's behavioral issues.

Myths and Facts about Foster and Adopted Kids

- ▶ **Myth:** Most foster and adopted children have experienced significant trauma that will impact their education.
- ▶ **Fact:** While all foster and adopted children have experienced loss in some way, the nature of trauma is different for every child. Many children who are adopted also experience stability and positive parenting throughout their lives.
- ▶ **Myth:** Teachers should assume that foster and adopted youth will have learning disabilities and behavioral health challenges.
- ▶ **Fact:** Adoption and foster care do not *cause* learning disabilities. Children are at greater risk for learning disabilities if they: experience trauma; have disruptions in their schooling; are born exposed to substances; and/or if they are genetically predisposed to disabilities, or mental health conditions.
- ▶ **Myth:** Because of their past experiences, most foster and adopted youth have difficulty building relationships with adults.
- ▶ **Fact:** Many children who experience foster care and/or who are adopted have close and positive relationships with adults. Each child is different. Some children who experience traumatic loss of important people in their lives may take longer to develop relationships in the future.

Key Terms and Definitions

“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. There are different types of adoption including closed vs. open; international vs. domestic; private vs. social service adoption.” (Source: *Childwelfare.gov*)

- **Open adoption:** Birth parents and adoptive parents have agreed to maintain some level of communication throughout the child’s life.
- **Closed adoption:** Birth parents and adoptive parents have agreed not to have any contact post-adoption.
- **International adoption:** The child is adopted from a country outside of their adoptive parents’ country of origin.
- **Domestic adoption:** The child is adopted from the country where their adoptive parents reside.
- **Public adoption (also called “social service adoption”):** Due to a safety concern with the biological parent(s), the state’s child welfare agency takes custody of the child, during which time they are in foster care. The child may ultimately be reunified with their parents, or the court may terminate parental rights, after which the child may be adopted.
- **Private adoption:** A biological parent voluntarily relinquishes legal rights to their child and selects an adoptive family to care for the child.

“Foster Care is a temporary service provided by States for children who cannot live with their families. Children in foster care may live with relatives or with unrelated foster parents. Foster care can also refer to placement settings such as group homes, residential care facilities, emergency shelters, and supervised independent living.” (Source: *Childwelfare.gov*)

“Kinship Care refers to the care of children by relatives or, in some jurisdictions, close family friends (often referred to as fictive kin). Relatives are the preferred resource for children who must be removed from their birth parents because it helps maintain the children’s connections with their families, increases stability, and overall minimizes the trauma of family separation.” (Source: *Childwelfare.gov*)

Common Challenges for Youth Who Have Experienced Foster Care

- Potential academic difficulties
- Low graduation, high dropout rates
- School behavior problems
- Frequent absences
- Higher risk of being held back a grade
- Misdiagnosed or undetected disabilities
- High rates of suspension/expulsion

- ▶ Many of these issues arise because schools do not understand the experiences of foster and adopted youth and have not established an environment that promotes their wellbeing.
- ▶ This can lead to educators misinterpreting students’ behavioral and academic difficulties and responding with inappropriate interventions.

Strategies for Building Relationships with Students and Caregivers

With Students:

- **Give students your undivided attention.** Connect with each student every day, for even a few minutes (e.g., during lunch, before/after school, or between classroom activities).
- **Make every student feel like the center of the universe.** Focus on each individual student for *at least* a few moments each day, with enthusiastic greetings and intentional eye contact.
- **Let them talk.** Try only asking questions during a conversation.
- **Respect boundaries.** Phrase questions broadly. If the student wants to share more, they can. (e.g., “Who do you live with?” vs “How often do you see your mom?”)
- **Follow through on what you say.** By doing this, you will begin to establish yourself as trustworthy and reliable.
- **Keep the student in the know.** Whether you are calling home, the office, or guidance, inform the student so they feel talked to, not talked about.
- **Accept emotions as true.** Even if a student’s reaction seems unexpected, the underlying feelings are real (“I understand you feel like I’m not listening to you. Let me clarify what I’m hearing...”)
- **Reconnect after conflict.** Once everyone has calmed down, have a conversation that acknowledges what happened while showing the student that you still care about them.
- **Create the feeling of safety by enforcing rules consistently.** You want your students to know the expectations in your classroom, and to trust you to maintain their safety.
- **Connect before you correct.** If a student’s behavior is escalating, take a moment to ask, “Are you okay?”, before you restate the limits or correct their behavior.
- **Offer specific and meaningful feedback.** Acknowledge students’ unique contributions, publicly and privately, to demonstrate that every student is a valued community member.
- **Celebrate the good.** Give sincere and specific compliments early and often. Try to give each student some kind of compliment every week.

With Caregivers:

- **Initiate contact early on.** Get to know your students’ caregivers and other important adults by sending a positive message home as soon as possible.
- **Acknowledge family diversity through language.** Use open-ended terminology when referring to family so that all types of families feel included and welcome. Encourage caregivers to share information about who is in the child’s family and who they live with.
- **Provide consistent positive communication.** Reserve ten minutes weekly to share a few positive observations about the student or things that are going particularly well for them.
- **Be honest about student struggles and problem-solve together.** Name specific behaviors the student has engaged in, ask how the student is doing at home, and brainstorm strategies for reinforcing positive behavior.

Supporting Youth in the Classroom and Across the Curriculum

1. **Present with positivity.** Many youth who experience trauma are adept at picking up the energy of others, including yours. Find intentional practices for managing your responses to challenging behavior so that you can remain calm and positive.
2. **Show unconditional positive regard.** Your students should know you believe in them, regardless of behavior or work completion.
3. **Use routines and be predictable.** Ring a bell, share your agenda, offer a warning before transitions. The teacher should facilitate the classroom flow, not the students.
4. **Be consistent & fair.** Implement the same rules every single day for every student, but be flexible enough to meet students where they are.
5. **Prioritize safety.** Set clear behavioral limits and social expectations for the class.
6. **Tell your students you believe in them.** Some students' self-esteem is based on how much their teachers believe in them, so this matters more than you might think.
7. **Provide positive feedback.** Break the cycle of self-doubt by reminding students that they have much to offer the world, and giving them examples of their unique strengths.
8. **Maintain explicit academic & social expectations.** Teach your students how to follow these expectations, practice them, and praise students when they are successful.
9. **Identify accommodations.** Work with your students to develop meaningful goals and to implement supports that will help them achieve those goals.
10. **Maintain high expectations.** Hold multiple truths at the same time. ("I understand that you had a long night and I believe that you are capable of completing this assignment".)

Addressing Adoption in Curriculum: Design inclusive lessons and build in choices

- **Don't assume.** Ask students about the special people in their lives.
- **Talk about different kinds of families.** Some families live all together and some live apart.
- **Check your language.** Use words like: *caregiver*, *grown ups*, *guardians*, instead of *parents*.
- **Preview the curriculum.** Assignments like family trees, family history, and stories about traumatic family separations, can be triggering. Modify assignments so students can participate in a way that works for them.
- **Talk about adoption and foster care.** Use real world examples, from literature and popular media, so students don't feel singled out.
- **Teach students how to participate successfully.** Create lessons with multiple entry points in case some students have attended school inconsistently. Teach the academic and behavior expectations, rather than assuming all students know, or will figure out, what to do.

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Resources:

www.childwelfare.gov/

www.teachallfamilies.com/

www.umass.edu/ruddchair/report

www.drgwenbass.com

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