



In the Children's World at School

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There is tremendous energy and change currently going on in the adoption community. Policies are evolving, research is underway, and programs are being developed to address problems. Secrets are giving way to more openness and there are new ways to communicate where there used to be only silence. Children and adults who were adopted, birth and adoptive parents, and professionals are moving quickly to learn new ways of talking and behaving.

All of this activity is helping to improve our understanding of how adoption impacts all members of the community, resulting in greater sensitivity and increased support when the losses of adoption bring pain despite the joy.

Oops – we left someone along the way! Well, actually, quite a few people – important people. In effect, anyone who is not in some way closely affiliated with adoption. They need information in order to change their old ways of thinking about adoption.

Who are they?

- Our children's friends
- Our children's teachers
- Our neighbors and co-workers
- Our friends and sometimes our extended family
- People we don't know at all but who remark about our kind of family (in the grocery store, at the restaurant, wherever!)
- TV personalities, news reporters, authors, artists
- Etc., etc., etc.

They are everywhere!

How are we going to educate all of these people? It will take time. Everyone in the adoption community needs to become adoption educators. Without question, we need to begin by helping children. They are the most vulnerable when they are exposed to the old ways of thinking about adoption. To help children, adoption educators need to be in the children's world. They need to reach children who are not part of the adoption community. In addition to supporting children in adoptive families, they must take on several complex tasks which include defining boundaries around adoption language, and laying foundations for non-adopted children to comprehend the sophisticated concepts of adoption as they grow up.

This kind of measured, thoughtful education is only possible through the schools. We must train teachers to be adoption educators.

Efforts are already under way. Adoptive parents are talking to teachers, counselors, and principals across the country, informing them of appropriate language and asking them to be aware of school assignments that might be difficult for an adopted student to complete. Some parents have given books to the library; some speak to classes to explain how their family came to be. Students in adoptive families are also speaking out, sharing their wisdom about adoption and setting boundaries when they are uncomfortable.

However, reaching all children through all teachers is a huge endeavor and will have to extend beyond the individual efforts of some adoptive parents. The adoption community as a whole must begin to encourage school personnel to take on this task.

In collaboration with educators, the adoption community can draw on its expertise and opportunities, but also must respect educators' perspectives and the constraints they have.

1. Teachers will know best how to adapt and present information so that it is appropriate for their class. They are experts at children's levels of understanding, how to present materials so that it is absorbed and remembered, and they can often predict unanticipated consequences. We can provide educators with information, but for the most part, they will be the ones to decide how, when, and what to share with their students.



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2. Teachers will need to understand the complexities of the subject before opening communication about adoption in the classroom. It is easy for adoptive parents to forget, because their children often have a fairly sophisticated understanding of adoption, that most students will have little exposure to adoption. Although there are many wonderful benefits to placing children in adoptive homes, their classmates may, at first, find it confusing and sad to talk about children who need to leave their birth families. They may even worry that adoption will suddenly happen to them. In general, it is probably best for teachers to educate students about adoptive families when they are in the elementary grades, and reserve adoption itself for upper grades. Adoption is about adult decisions that are difficult for children and many teens to understand.

As a basis for planning, educators need to know:

- How children in adoptive families normally think and feel about adoption at different ages and stages of development; and
 - How children who are not in adoptive families learn about adoption (movies, books, friends) and how they are likely to think and feel about it at different ages and stages.
3. Teachers will feel most comfortable as they practice how they will model positive language and appropriate boundaries. Conversation about adoption is new; it is likely to feel awkward at first. Children often notice when adults are unsure about something, and in this case, it is important to send both overt and subtle messages which are positive. It is important that students only hear in a teacher's voice and observe in his or her demeanor **acceptance** of adoption as a way build families. They need to have no doubt that the world has determined adoption to be a positive way to ensure families for some children.

Teachers can practice by considering potential situations in advance and reflecting on how best to support adopted students. For example, they can plan how to respond calmly when they hear non-adopted students voice their curiosity in inappropriate ways. Some of the questions they may hear include "Why didn't his mother keep him?" "Is that your real sister?"

4. Teachers should understand that they do not need to plan lessons on adoption. The best ways to normalize adoptive families or adoption is to find opportunities to weave information into their regular lessons and class conversations. Teachers and counselors need strategies and guidelines. They need background information and facts to help them maintain a generalized, education focus. Once educators have let their students know that they are willing to discuss this subject, they may find it is a little like opening a can of worms; therefore, many will appreciate suggestions for age-appropriate goals, which can help them maintain a focus when students present them with a range of questions.

It is possible that many in the adoption community will feel anxious about sharing the educational role with teachers. This is such a personal, highly complicated subject! It is also true that some educators will have outdated thoughts and biases that need to change. However, if we can bear in mind the consequences of continued myths and misunderstandings, it is easier to reach out to others who can help us to create a world that is truly positive about adoption as a valid way to build families



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