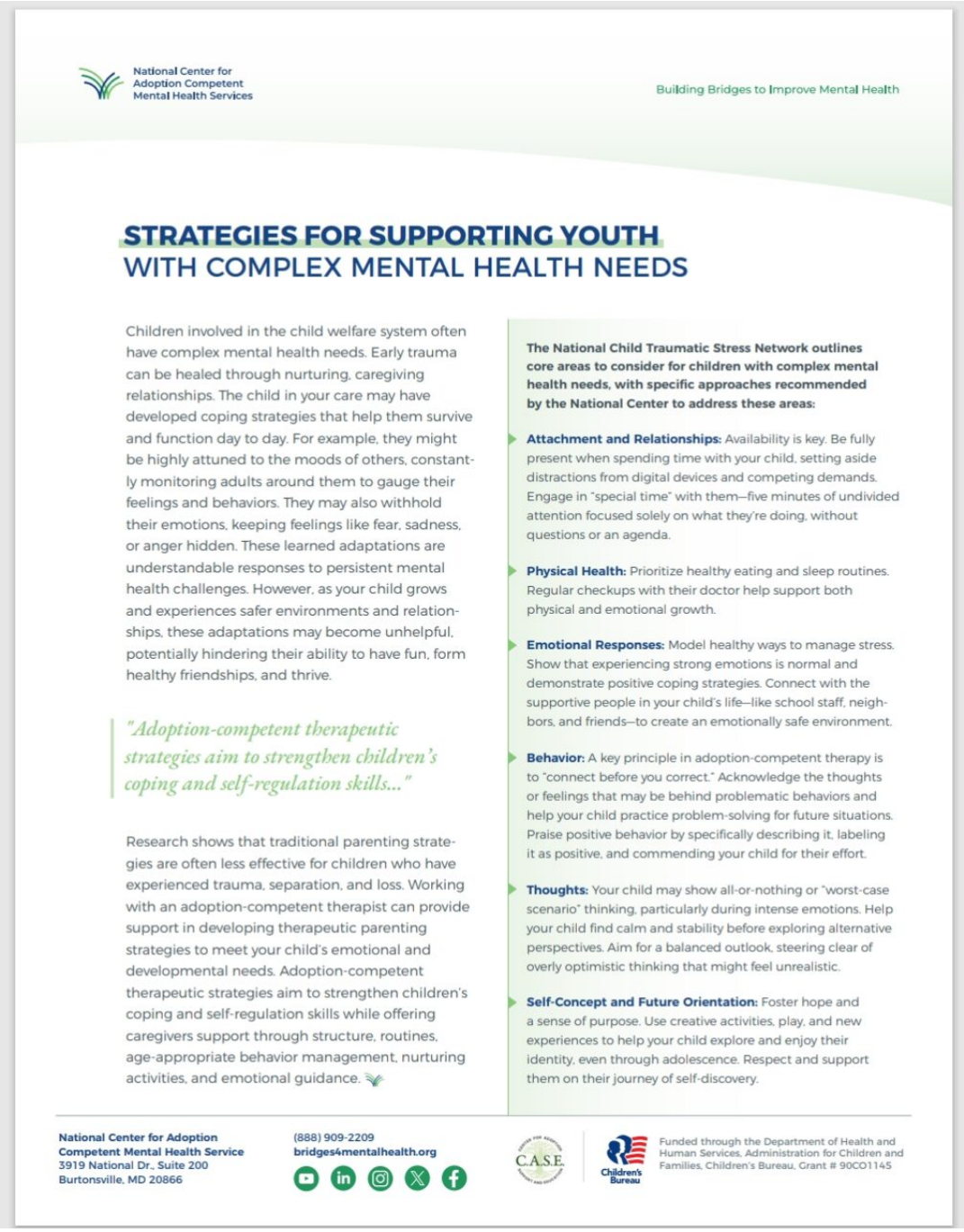
Strategies for Supporting Youth with Complex Mental Health Needs

Parenting Resources · https://bridges4mentalhealth.org/hub/parenting-resources/strategies-for-supporting-youth-with-complex-mental-health-needs/



National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services

Building Bridges to Improve Mental Health

STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH WITH COMPLEX MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS

Children involved in the child welfare system often have complex mental health needs. Early trauma can be healed through nurturing, caregiving relationships. The child in your care may have developed coping strategies that help them survive and function day to day. For example, they might be highly attuned to the moods of others, constantly monitoring adults around them to gauge their feelings and behaviors. They may also withhold their emotions, keeping feelings like fear, sadness, or anger hidden. These learned adaptations are understandable responses to persistent mental health challenges. However, as your child grows and experiences safer environments and relationships, these adaptations may become unhelpful, potentially hindering their ability to have fun, form healthy friendships, and thrive.

> *"Adoption-competent therapeutic strategies aim to strengthen children's coping and self-regulation skills..."*

Research shows that traditional parenting strategies are often less effective for children who have experienced trauma, separation, and loss. Working with an adoption-competent therapist can provide support in developing therapeutic parenting strategies to meet your child's emotional and developmental needs. Adoption-competent therapeutic strategies aim to strengthen children's coping and self-regulation skills while offering caregivers support through structure, routines, age-appropriate behavior management, nurturing activities, and emotional guidance.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network outlines core areas to consider for children with complex mental health needs, with specific approaches recommended by the National Center to address these areas:

- **Attachment and Relationships:** Availability is key. Be fully present when spending time with your child, setting aside distractions from digital devices and competing demands. Engage in "special time" with them—five minutes of undivided attention focused solely on what they're doing, without questions or an agenda.
- **Physical Health:** Prioritize healthy eating and sleep routines. Regular checkups with their doctor help support both physical and emotional growth.
- **Emotional Responses:** Model healthy ways to manage stress. Show that experiencing strong emotions is normal and demonstrate positive coping strategies. Connect with the supportive people in your child's life—like school staff, neighbors, and friends—to create an emotionally safe environment.
- **Behavior:** A key principle in adoption-competent therapy is to "connect before you correct." Acknowledge the thoughts or feelings that may be behind problematic behaviors and help your child practice problem-solving for future situations. Praise positive behavior by specifically describing it, labeling it as positive, and commending your child for their effort.
- **Thoughts:** Your child may show all-or-nothing or "worst-case scenario" thinking, particularly during intense emotions. Help your child find calm and stability before exploring alternative perspectives. Aim for a balanced outlook, steering clear of overly optimistic thinking that might feel unrealistic.
- **Self-Concept and Future Orientation:** Foster hope and a sense of purpose. Use creative activities, play, and new experiences to help your child explore and enjoy their identity, even through adolescence. Respect and support them on their journey of self-discovery.

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