

CARE FOR THE CAREGIVER:

Why Maternal Mental Health Matters for Children and Families

It is 3:17 a.m., and a mother is sitting on the edge of her bed.

Her baby is finally asleep, but she cannot rest. She is exhausted, anxious, and overwhelmed. She worries constantly that she is doing something wrong. She has missed appointments because arranging transportation and childcare feels impossible. When someone asks how she is doing, she says, “Fine.”

But she is not fine. She needs support.

Now imagine that instead of encountering a coordinated system prepared to recognize her mental health needs, understand the needs of her child, and support their relationship, she encounters disconnected services. One provider focuses on her symptoms. Another focuses on the baby. Another becomes concerned about whether the family is coping safely at home. What began as a need for mental health support can escalate into a much larger family crisis.

This scenario is fictional but reflects challenges families may encounter when mental health, child welfare, and family-serving systems are not well coordinated.



Maternal Mental Health Is a Family Issue

Maternal mental health conditions are common and treatable. According to the [Policy Center for Maternal Mental Health](#), these conditions affect approximately **1 in 5 mothers** during pregnancy or the first year postpartum.

Yet access to care remains a significant challenge. The Policy Center reports that **84% of the U.S. perinatal population lives in a Maternal Mental Health Shortage Area**, highlighting the distance between recognizing a need and receiving appropriate support.

For families involved with child welfare, maternal mental health support may also need to address trauma, separation, loss, changing caregiving relationships, and permanency. An **adoption competent lens** can help professionals recognize and respond to these interconnected experiences.

When Mental Health and Child Welfare Intersect

Research has identified an association between serious maternal mental illness and child welfare involvement. This relationship is complex and may also reflect barriers involving access to treatment, poverty, housing, social

support, discrimination, and the availability of family-centered services.

One study of 4,827 Medicaid-eligible mothers found that mothers with serious mental illness were almost **three times as likely** as mothers without serious mental illness to experience child welfare involvement or have children placed in out-of-home care, even after researchers accounted for several other factors¹. These findings underscore the importance of looking beyond a parent's diagnosis to understand the broader circumstances affecting the entire family.

Adoption competency becomes particularly relevant when a family is navigating child welfare involvement, separation, placement, reunification, adoption, guardianship, or kinship caregiving.

Where Adoption Competency Fits

[Adoption competent mental health care](#) prepares professionals to understand how trauma, separation, loss, grief, attachment disruptions, identity, belonging, and changing caregiving relationships can affect children, youth, and families impacted by child welfare.

Consider a mother receiving mental health treatment while her young child is temporarily living with relatives or in foster care. Her treatment cannot be fully separated from grief, uncertainty, guilt, fear, and relationship changes connected to that separation. Likewise, the child's behaviors and emotional responses cannot be understood solely as symptoms to manage without considering what the child has experienced.

An adoption competent professional is better prepared to see beyond behavior to the story beneath it. Rather than asking only, "What symptoms are we treating?" adoption competent care encourages professionals to consider what parents and children have experienced, what strengths and relationships can support healing, and how treatment can support the parent-child relationship and permanency goals.

Moving Upstream Before Families Reach Crisis

Supporting families earlier requires systems to make it easier for parents and children to access coordinated, family-centered care. Child welfare and behavioral health systems can support families by:

- **Expanding access to mental health care:** Connect parents and caregivers to timely, appropriate services before needs escalate.
- **Building stronger referral pathways:** Create clear connections among behavioral health, child welfare, early intervention, and other family-serving providers.
- **Strengthening adoption competency:** Prepare professionals to recognize and respond to trauma, separation, grief, attachment, and identity.
- **Supporting parent-child relationships:** Incorporate relationship-based and family-centered approaches into treatment and services.
- **Coordinating care and engaging families:** Share responsibility across systems and include parents and caregivers in decisions about treatment, safety, well-being, and permanency.

Stronger Parents. Stronger Relationships. Stronger Families.

Return to the mother sitting awake at 3:17 a.m. and imagine a different path.

Someone recognizes that she is struggling and connects her with appropriate mental health care. Her provider understands that supporting her also means understanding her role as a parent. If child welfare becomes involved, professionals communicate rather than operate in silos.

Most importantly, she does not have to navigate all of it alone.

The [National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services](#) helps child welfare and behavioral health systems strengthen workforce knowledge, cross-system collaboration, and access to adoption competent care through [no-cost training](#), [technical assistance](#), and [resources](#).

When we support maternal mental health through an adoption competent lens, we do more than address individual needs. We strengthen relationships, promote healing, and help families thrive together.

1. Verbiest, S., Klein-Cox, A., Grewal-Kök, Y., Goodell, C., & Anderson, C. (April 2026). *Maternal Health and Child Welfare: A Long-Overdue Conversation*. Social Work, Volume 71, Issue 2. Pages 188–190. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/swag010>.



Mental health challenges can sometimes become overwhelming, and no one should have to navigate a crisis alone. If you are a mother, parent, caregiver, or someone concerned about a loved one who is experiencing emotional distress, a mental health crisis, or thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to connect with the 988 **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** for free, confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.