

ADOPTION COMPETENT THERAPY AND TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Adoption competency is not a single practice or protocol but a comprehensive set of knowledge, values, and skills competencies. Adoption competency encompasses a range of core tenets that are rooted in the belief that healing occurs best in the context of family and that parents are considered primary agents for change and growth.



This distinction is paramount given the interpersonal nature of the primal, profound, and lifelong losses that adopted children experience in being separated from their birth/first families. The experience of being adopted and transplanted into a new environment can impact the child's ability to attach to their new caregivers/adoptive parents, peers, and later, intimate relations. When separations and/or subsequent experiences are experienced as traumatic, a child's development in any/all domains and functioning will be further impacted. Assessment and intervention of these nuances are a unique hallmark of adoption competent care. Adoption competent approaches by their very nature address and target the combined critical issues of attachment and trauma to a child's development and functioning as they are inextricably intertwined.

Adoption competent professionals understand the breadth and depth of losses, the complexity of identity formation, and the implications of trauma to a developing brain and body. As such, they place less emphasis on assigning diagnostic labels and greater emphasis on making sense of the child's past, emphasizing safe and positive experiences in the present, and maintaining or

creating connections for the future. They recognize challenging behaviors are manifestations of an array of biological and experiential risk factors and that these often pre-date adoptive placement, ever heightening a strengths-based, supportive approach with adoptive parents and kinship caregivers. The understanding that children have survived adverse experiences and have developed defensive behaviors triggered by their brains and manifested through their actions is a critical cornerstone of both adoption competent practice and trauma informed care.

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is a framework that acknowledges and responds to the widespread impact of trauma on all individuals involved with a program, organization, or system. TIC works to understand potential pathways to recovery and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization through the integration of knowledge about the trauma into policies, procedures, and practices (SAMHSA, 2014). Complimenting an adoption competent framework, TIC is an all-encompassing approach that involves supporting the child and the adults who care for them, such as parents, siblings, other family members, and teachers.



Identifying Complex Trauma

Children can experience traumatic events in many ways. However, some of the most common situations that can cause trauma for children involved in the child welfare system include:

- Physical, sexual and or emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Separation from or loss of a loved one
- Prenatal exposure to adverse experiences and substances

Exposure to these events on their own does not always have a lasting traumatizing impact. In the general population, loved ones and attentive care after the events can be powerful antioxidants to long lasting impacts of these experience. However, children who were adopted often did not have the safety and stability needed to offset serious effects. Further, children who were later separated from their birth/first parents (such as through foster care) experienced prolonged periods of maltreatment. It is the complex enduring effects of such circumstances, combined with a lack of consistent primary caregiver support and safety that often has far reaching impacts on a child's development.

Common Symptoms:

- Increased fear and anxiety
- Loss of appetite/overeating
- Sleep issues
- Lying
- Stealing
- Developmental delays
- Sexualized or aggressive behavior
- Drug or alcohol use (more specific to pre-teens and teens)
- Feelings of guilt and/or shame
- Social issues with friends and/or peers
- More crying
- Aggression
- Outbursts
- Depression
- Self-harm
- Low self-esteem/self-worth

Some Children

May Also Experience:

- Flashbacks
- Memory loss
- Hypervigilance
- Disassociation
- Chronic nightmares

NCTSN  The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides information about complex trauma including standardized assessments.

Trauma-Informed Treatments and the Cross Over with Adoption Competence Approaches

Adoption competent mental health practitioners recognize both the complex mental health needs of children and the limitations of current diagnostic, treatment, and medication practices. While they may strategically employ selected evidence-based interventions (such as those listed in the [California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse](#) and [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#)) most interventions described there have not demonstrated their effectiveness with adoptive populations and, if used alone, lead to very narrow treatment approaches that do not fully attend to the complex issues inherent in adoption (Kerr & Cossar, 2014; Harris-Waller et al., 2018; Chobhthaigh & Duffy, 2019; Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2023). A more comprehensive approach to treatment integrates knowledge, values, and skills of adoption competency, along with counseling, integrating specific evidence-based therapeutic interventions. Some such interventions can be found in the [NTI Directory of Therapies](#).



Adoption competent professionals are trauma-informed and trained in the unique experiences of children and families who have experienced child welfare, as well as the other challenges that

children who have a history of disrupted attachments and traumatic experiences may face. They are most qualified to work with children and families to address grief and loss, the need for parents to develop a parenting style that puts attachment needs first, and help the family understand the added complexities involved in the normative developmental stages of adoptive families. Adoption-competent therapists are trauma-informed and understand how to explain the neurobiology of trauma to parents/caregivers to support a therapeutic parenting approach. They support parents in developing an in-depth understanding of their child's unique history, re-framing behaviors based on their deeper understanding of the child's experiences and establishing developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations.

Conclusions

Adoption competent therapists are trauma-informed and most qualified to help children and families who have experienced child welfare. Systems that employ and train adoption competent clinicians provide treatments that are responsive to the complex and developmental traumas that children being adopted from foster care have experienced.

In many cases, families will pursue treatment that is not adoption competent, resulting in minimum progress for their children or an increased risk of re-traumatization. Families and professionals can provide more positive outcomes for the children they care for by fully understanding how to identify and address trauma and evidence-based treatments for trauma; all of which an adoption competent therapist can help them do.

To learn more about adoption competent mental health, child welfare and mental health professionals can access the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative](#). Visit the [Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#) to find therapists by State. 🌱