

Guiding Principles for Adoption Competent Child Welfare Practice

Guiding Principles Relating to Your Work with Children and Youth

This curriculum sets forth a set of basic values and beliefs, referred to as Guiding Principles, that guide adoption competent child welfare practice. As you review these principles, think about how they fit with your own views and practice.

Guiding Principle #1: *Loss is at the Heart of Every Adoption and Guardianship - Loss is at the heart of every adoption or guardianship and cannot be ignored.*

Too often, we focus on the gains. For example, finding a family for a child or filling the void for infertile couples, without acknowledging and honoring the losses inherent in adoption or guardianship.

Children Adopted As Infants: Generally, children adopted as infants do not become aware of the loss aspects of adoption until they are school age. However, some preschool adoptees, such as those adopted transracially, may react to differences between themselves and adoptive family members and begin to grapple with separation from their birth families.

Children Adopted At Older Ages: For children adopted at older ages, loss becomes particularly salient. They have endured multiple losses over a long period of time, including foster parents, siblings, friends, and homes. Too often they have not been afforded the opportunity through supportive, clinical experiences to mourn these losses. We know that unresolved losses contribute to compromised attachments, tenuous placements, and profound emotional discord.

Intensity of Grief: The intensity of grief related to adoption loss is often difficult for others to understand. If the sadness is not addressed, it will often find alternative expression through anger or rage.

Ambiguous Loss and Disenfranchised Grief: Two aspects of adoption loss that make it more difficult to resolve are the nature of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief. Those whom the child have lost are likely to be living, which makes it hard to accept the finality of the loss. Also, the adopted person's grief is typically not acknowledged or supported by others.

Guiding Principle #2: *Secure Attachments Can Be Built and Re-Built*

All is not lost for children with compromised beginnings. A child who has experienced poor nurture and impaired attachments can build new, secure attachments when the proper therapeutic work is done by the parents, with the help of Child Welfare Professionals. We will be fully exploring attachment in a later module, including how reparative work can be done.

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If we hold this belief in the potential for resiliency, Child Welfare Professionals, parents, and children can have hope and strive for positive outcomes.

Guiding Principle #3: *Healing Occurs in a Trusting Family Relationship* - Healing from trauma, loss, and insecure attachments occurs in the context of a trusting family relationship.

Children who cannot live with their birth parents need nurturing and support from safe and stable adoptive or guardianship families, whether relatives or non-relatives, to build secure attachments and felt safety, and to enhance their development and well-being. When possible, they are best served in families where they have existing attachments, with relatives or fictive kin. When this is not possible, children who have impaired attachments can build new, secure attachments with the support of committed parents, child welfare, and mental health professionals.

Guiding Principle #4: *Adoption Has a Lifelong Impact* - Adoption is a lifelong process that impacts the individual throughout their lifespan.

Virtually all adopted individuals will search for answers to many questions related to adoption throughout their lives, and they often struggle with a range of feelings and issues. This is true even for children/youth who were adopted as infants and have no memory of their birth family.

An adoption scholar defined adoptive identity development as, “How the individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption” (*Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000, p. 381*). Adoptees’ interest in adoption-related issues fall along a continuum and vary in intensity at different periods of their lives.

Some studies of both adopted teens and adults find the range of interest breaks down to roughly one-third with low interest or preoccupation, one-third with moderate interest, and one-third with intense interest.

Research indicates that adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for adopted people as they go through childhood, into adolescence, and young adulthood, and it remains important for the majority, even when they are adults.

Guiding Principle #5: *Communicative Openness Helps Children Process Their Story Through a Developmental Lens*

There are predictable developmental phases for adoptive and guardianship families that are different than for birth families. A child’s understanding of what it means to be adopted is very different at age 4 than at age 10 or 16. Both the Child Welfare Worker and parents need to understand how children and youth process information about their story at various points in their life and give them the tools

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to communicate their story in meaningful ways.

Research on both adopted children and adolescents indicates that youth experiencing more open communication about their adoption had fewer behavior problems and better overall family functioning. The youth with high levels of open communication about their adoption report higher self-esteem, more trust for their parents, and fewer feelings of alienation than their peers with less open communication.

In all families, communication patterns affect children's adjustment, and openness in communication is critically important in adoptive families. Communicative openness is important whether the adoption is closed, open, or somewhere in between.

Child Welfare Professionals must learn language that will enable them to speak honestly with children about what has happened to them and be able to help children and their parents manage the pain of difficult or missing information. Your ability to have open, honest conversations about what to expect and what the changes and challenges are likely to be will serve the family well.

Guiding Principle #6: Diversity Impacts Identity and Adjustment

Race, ethnicity, culture, class, and sexual orientation and gender identity all have a unique role in adoption and guardianship practice and in the positive identity formation of children and youth.

Child Welfare Professionals must develop awareness of how these factors impact assessments, placement decisions, and case plans. Equally important is the ability to address discrimination, historical trauma, self-esteem, identity formation, and other aspects of adoption or guardianship.

You must also be willing to have difficult conversations and educate parents to do the same. When children have a different race or ethnicity, culture, or sexual orientation or gender identity than their parents, it is very important for parents to honor these aspects of the youth's identity and provide socialization experiences that facilitate this.

Guiding Principle #7: Connections Matter

Can you imagine what it would feel like to wake up tomorrow and have lost all connection to the people you live with and love the most? That's essentially what happens to young people who come into foster care. We need to acknowledge that while removing a child from their family may be in their best interest from a safety perspective, it doesn't guarantee their well-being.

Connections to parents, siblings, and extended family, and the things we are familiar with, are essential to all of us. Once a strong attachment has developed, it is never wholly replaceable by another, nor should it be. Whether or not these connections are physically present or even biologically connected, they are emotionally present.

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Children are thinking about them, worrying about them, and wondering about them. So, we need to look for ways to help children honor and safely maintain their connections and relationships.

Former foster parents, relatives, siblings, and even teachers, coaches, or other role models may all be very important to the child, and these relationships should be explored carefully and maintained, when safe to do so.

As a Child Welfare Professional, you need to be aware of the importance of the psychological connections children have and help them and their families to honor their place in the child's life.

Guiding Principles Relating to Your Work with Parents and Families

Guiding Principle #8: *Unresolved Parental Grief Impacts Parenting*

People come to the decision to adopt or serve as guardians for many reasons. Some of these involve grief that is still unresolved; for example, grief around infertility, loss of children, or the parent's own traumatic childhood experiences.

It's really important in your work with adoptive parents and guardians that you understand their motivation, you assess for unresolved grief, and you help parents understand how a child's behavior can trigger their own emotions, no matter how well they think they have resolved the grief. Imagine an adoptive mother whose unresolved grief about her own infertility is triggered when her adoptive, teenage daughter becomes pregnant. An already stressful situation becomes more so because the mother isn't prepared for her anger and feelings of resentment.

Parents can't provide the healing environment for their children if they haven't done their own healing. While we can't anticipate every eventuality, we need to assess and discuss this upfront with parents; and, when necessary, connect parents to resources to help them do their own healing work.

Guiding Principle #9: *Family Formation Occurs Developmentally* - Adoption and guardianship family formation is a life-long, intergenerational process.

Introduction: Separation from birth family, and often from one's culture or country, continues to impact individuals who are adopted and their families throughout their lives and into future generations. Click the colored tabs to learn more.

Developmental Phases: There are predictable developmental phases in adoptive families that are different than in birth families. One example is the child's changing perception and awareness of what their adoption means to them.

Understanding and Education: Child Welfare Professionals must help parents understand these

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developmental stages and how children begin to process the unique aspects of their story. We must educate parents about the key elements of the child's story and give parents the tools to help communicate this information with their child.

Guiding Principle #10: *Healing Happens in the Context of a Family*

Environment: Creating a healing environment within the family is the job of parents. They need to understand that children often bring negative behaviors with them that may have served a survival purpose in previous environments, and that many children come into care with behavioral and mental health challenges.

Family is Central: Parents have the responsibility to provide a safe environment in which children are helped to learn new relationship and coping skills so their negative behaviors no longer are necessary. Every child is different, but regardless of what issues the child presents, the family is central to children's healing.

Needs of Children: Even experienced parents may have to learn new ways to parent to meet the needs of children with complex challenges. As a Child Welfare Professional, you provide the bridge to healing through your preparation work with parents - by supporting them in learning new ways to parent their child, helping them set realistic expectations, and supporting them through the therapeutic process.

Guiding Principle #11: *Families Need a Supportive Network*

All of us need caring, supportive people (what we call a kinship network) in order to be successful, and this is certainly true for the families and the children we serve. The kinship network should be defined by the family. It may include relatives, friends, members of the faith community, and others the parents rely on.

It should also include significant people from the child's past: Safe birth family members, teachers or coaches, former foster parents or social workers. An important part of your work with families early on is to help them identify, connect with and build on their natural supports to provide needed support when the family needs it most.

Guiding Principle #12: *Minimize Negative Impact of Change - Children should not have to change excessively to fit into a family.*

Promote Adjustment: Every child who changes homes is in a crisis of adjustment - changing worlds, particularly if the child is from another culture, economic class, religion, or community. The family can soften the negative impact of these changes by having realistic expectations and appreciating the child's individuality.

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Understand the Child: You can help the family better understand the child they are embracing. This includes understanding their habits, likes and dislikes, interests, and traditions. Parents also need to understand the child's previous experiences and their impact on the child's development, behavior, and coping strategies.

Be Flexible and Intentional: While every family has its established patterns and schedules, you can help parents recognize the importance of being flexible and intentional in embracing routines, activities, and interests of the child. Providing a sense of familiarity for children in crisis increases their comfort and fosters a sense of being known by, and mattering to, the parents.

Guiding Principles of Case Work for the Child Welfare Professional

Guiding Principle #13: *What You Do Impacts the Child - What you do impacts the child.*

In your work with children and teens, everything you do has a potential impact, positive or negative, on their mental health. Click each topic to learn more.

Choices: The choices you make can minimize or compound trauma for them. For example, explaining to a child why foster care placement was needed can reduce the anxiety and fear that comes with being separated from their family.

Openness: Simply being open about where they're going and why can establish trust and help with their adjustment to change. On the other hand, moving children and teens when they're in crisis can reinforce the belief that they are bad and contributes to their poor adjustment.

Quality: The quality of your relationship with children matters. Being authentic and doing what you say you will is crucial to help to build the trust that is so important to children.

Consult: Because every interaction or decision you make can have the ability to impact the child's well-being, it's also important to consult your supervisor and team when making critical decisions. This will help make sure you are considering all options and impacts on the children you serve.

Guiding Principle #14: *Commit to Preventing Additional Trauma*

Losing one's birth family may be the most traumatic event a child will experience, no matter how difficult the circumstances were. Your commitment to addressing these losses with children openly, honestly, and with support will help them to express their feelings and mourn their losses.

Likewise, reducing their number of moves while in foster care (especially moves made while they're in crisis), can minimize the trauma they experience. Every unnecessary or unplanned move disrupts the child's attachments, developmental progress, and self-esteem, which is why it is so important that you use your influence to minimize moves.

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Now, it's not uncommon for the first placement in foster care to be a short-term or emergency placement. However, the next placement should be a concurrent planning placement in which the family is willing to be that child's permanent family if reunification doesn't happen.

There are two important exceptions to this practice that must be noted. In cases where safe, available relatives were not known or identified for the initial placement, they should be considered for the next concurrent planning placement.

For eligible American Indian children, a home that is not compliant with the Indian Child Welfare Act should never intentionally be used with permanency in mind. This practice can set the child and the family up for unnecessary trauma.

Guiding Principle #15: Services Should Be Strengths-Based

Our work with children must occur in the context of the family system. Children don't live or act in isolation - there is a dynamic interplay with all family members. Click on "Family" and "Child Welfare Professional" to learn how they fit into the framework.

Family System: Parents or guardians need to be involved in their child's case planning and treatment planning. This is true even when children are placed out of home, in which case the foster or adoptive parents or guardians are essential partners in the child's plan of care.

Child Welfare Professional: It's also important that we focus on strengths. We hear a lot nowadays about the importance of being strengths-based but the fact is that change happens best when individual and family strengths are recognized and when they're capitalized on to effect change. Think of parents as the agents of change and you, the Child Welfare Professional, as the facilitator of that change. This idea lends itself to empowering the family to take the lead in creating the healing environment for their child.

The families you will be working with interact with multiple systems. Child welfare and legal systems; medical, mental health and education systems; extended social support networks; and other environmental systems all impact the family's success and stability.

Because of the systemic nature of this work, it will be important in your role to provide advocacy and collaborate with other disciplines.

Guiding Principle #16: Integrate the Child's and Family's History Into Assessment

A comprehensive assessment is the foundation for developing effective case plans and making good placement decisions with the children and families you serve.

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Child: What factors are important to consider when assessing a child prior to placement?

- Information about the child's past experiences
- Thorough review of psychological, social, and educational needs
- As much birth family and cultural information as possible

The assessment is not the time to gloss over details. For example, saying that a child was sexually abused is too vague and minimizes the child's experiences. However, saying that the child lived with her offender and was sexually abused weekly for two years shows a much more accurate picture of the child and the impact of those experiences on her.

Parent: What factors are important to consider when assessing parents prior to placement?

- A thorough review of their past experiences
- Psychosocial information
- Their ability to parent a child with particular challenges and needs

Guiding Principle #17: *Normalize the Recurrent Need for Help*

An important part of your work with adoptive and guardianship families is normalizing the need for help. Seeking help is a strength we should welcome and honor; and we should encourage families to reach out early - and not wait until problems reach a crisis level. Because adoption is developmentally processed, the families you serve are likely to need ongoing support and will come back as needs arise.

Wise parents know they don't have all the answers; and, they know that being an "experienced parent" is no indication that their parenting style will necessarily fit the needs of a new child. Asking for help is not a sign of failure - we want parents to reach out for help and we must be ready to provide competent support and appropriate referrals when they do.

Guiding Principle #18: *Respect Diversity in Practice*

Issues of diversity - including race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation and gender identity all have a unique role in adoption and guardianship practice - particularly so when the adoption or guardianship is a trans-racial or trans-cultural one.

Acknowledging your own biases is essential to your ability to support the child and their adoptive or guardianship family.

Think about how you feel about transracial and transcultural placement. Is it your belief that children should be raised in a family of their own race or culture? Or, do you believe that gay parents should be allowed to adopt?

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Whatever your biases may be, acknowledging them and being open to issues of diversity is critical to effectively work with and support children and their families. That's the only way to assure that you provide services and supports that are truly in the best interest of all the children and families you serve.

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