

From Complexity to Connection: A Toolkit for Transforming Care for Children and Families

Strategies for Addressing Complex Needs

Children who have been involved in the child welfare system have often experienced trauma, disrupted attachments, and multiple transitions. These adverse experiences can have lasting effects on a child's health, development, and overall well-being.

Healing from these harms requires nurturing, stable caregiving relationships, and families often need services tailored to their unique circumstances. However, research shows that traditional outpatient mental health services do not consistently lead to meaningful improvements in children's behavioral health. Caregivers also frequently find that conventional parenting strategies do not adequately address the needs of children with these complex life experiences.

When families seek support, they often encounter significant barriers to accessing services that truly meet their clinical and relational needs. Adoption-competent mental health services were developed in response to these gaps.

Adoption competency is child welfare/permanency competency

The term "adoption competency" comes from long-standing research with adoptive families. As adoption competency evolved, it became clear that children in adoptive, foster, and kinship families share many of the same challenges, so adoption-competent practices can also inform work with foster and kinship families, which is why some refer to it as permanency or child welfare competency. All children, youth, and families who have encountered the child welfare system will benefit from adoption competent mental health services.

Adoption competent mental health services have been shown to be more effective with this population and in a recent study done on Training for Adoption Competency (TAC), families treated by TAC-trained clinicians reported significantly better posttreatment outcomes, including enhanced family well-being, closer family bonds, improved understanding of the child's needs, better parenting strategies, and positive changes in the child's emotional, behavioral, and social functioning. These strong results of TAC's effectiveness inspire confidence that the foundational practices advanced through NTI will drive meaningful, system-level transformation nationwide.



► [The Case for Adoption Competency](#)



► [2025 TAC STUDY FOR EFFECTIVENESS](#)

How adoption competency is responsive to children’s needs

Adoption competency is about understanding the impact of disrupted and complex caregiving relationships. Competent professionals are trained to understand children’s behaviors in the context of their relationships and experiences within the child welfare system. In their practice, these professionals respond empathetically to the underlying needs of children and families through family-centered, trauma-informed care. By building core competencies, practitioners can guide families toward understanding, resilience, and connection and empower caregivers to become agents of healing.



- ▶ [Assessing Trauma Exposure and Its Impact on Children | Review 360](#)
- ▶ [Building Trust After Trauma in Adoptive and Foster Families](#)
- ▶ [Engagement of Parents as Agents of Healing](#)
- ▶ [Understanding the Complex Mental Health Needs of Children in Child Welfare](#)
- ▶ [Using Therapeutic Strategies to Address Challenging Behaviors](#)

Adoption competent systems recognize that “high-acuity” children or “children with complex needs” really are children whose needs have been unmet by the system.



- ▶ [Holistic Strategies to Address Complex Needs](#)

Adoption competent systems:

- Prioritize relationship repair, permanency, identity development, and lasting post-adoption support
- Understand behavior as communication shaped by trauma, fear, and attachment disruptions
- Address relational patterns, caregiver trauma, blocked care, and family-system healing
- Strengthen attachment by positioning caregivers as the primary therapeutic agents
- View and respond to crisis situations as a result of attachment rupture, trauma reenactment, grief response, or nervous-system dysregulation
- Promote coordinated, cross-system collaboration to ensure consistency and continuity of care



- ▶ [Understanding & Addressing the Complex Mental Health Needs of Children in Adoptive and Guardianship Families.](#)



National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services

The National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services works with States, Tribes, and territories across the country to build adoption competent services and systems that are responsive to the unique needs of children and families who have experienced the child welfare system. **Oklahoma** is one such state that has been on a ten-year journey to becoming an adoption competent system.



- ▶ [Oklahoma's Journey to Adoption Competency](#)

Be part of the solution!

Professionals can find more resources in the Knowledge Hub and enroll in the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative

[Visit the Knowledge Hub](#)

[Enroll in NTI](#)

Families can find adoption competent mental health professionals in the National Directory

[Find Mental Health Professionals](#)