

National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative

Definition of an Adoption Competent Child Welfare Professional

A child welfare professional who is adoption competent provides services responsive to the mental health needs of children in and moving toward permanency through adoption or guardianship.

An adoption competent child welfare professional has:

- a family-centered, strengths-based, evidence-informed holistic approach to working with children and youth and their birth and adoptive families, guardians, and other caregivers;
- a foundational understanding of the historical context of adoption and the laws, policies, procedures, and evolving best practice standards related to adoption and guardianship on which to engage in practices that effectively address mental health issues of children in foster care and moving to adoptive or guardianship families; and
- a capacity to work effectively with children and their kinship networks and cultures.

An adoption competent child welfare professional understands:

- the mental health challenges associated with experiencing neglect, abuse, trauma, separation, and loss;
- the implications of adverse pre- and perinatal and early childhood experiences for later development and mental health and how these experiences are manifested;
- the types and behavioral manifestations of trauma, loss and unresolved grief;
- principles and techniques of attachment-based casework that builds strong and healthy family relationships;
- principles and strategies of therapeutic parenting;
- key features of evidence-based and evidence-informed mental health therapeutic interventions within the context of limitations of current diagnostic assessment and medication practices;
- the need to support and strengthen strong and healthy family relationships through adoption and guardianship;
- the benefits of supporting cooperative, collaborative and healthy relationships between adoptive/guardianship families and birth family members;
- the importance of building strengths and resilience to support healthy development and recovery from trauma; and
- specific casework tasks that address mental health needs during preparation for and after achieving permanency through adoption or guardianship.

An adoption competent child welfare professional is committed to diverse families and seeks to preserve and honor in practice the racial and cultural heritage of children and families, including:

- having capacity to work effectively with children and families of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and their kinship networks and cultures;



- engaging in casework that helps children develop strengths and resilience that can mitigate discrimination based on race, culture or gender identity;
- helping parents to foster the development of positive cultural, racial, and gender identities and connections;
- seeing culture as a resource for an enhanced sense of belonging and permanence; and
- respecting the sovereign role of American Indian tribes in the decision making regarding the lives of their children.

An adoption competent child welfare professional values:

- his/her critical role in the conscious use of self as a bridge to healing relationships and experiences for children; child welfare practices that mitigate harm from trauma, recognize and preserve connections, promote healing, and build strengths and resilience;
- child welfare practices that allow children to know their full stories, to have opportunities for safe and therapeutic understanding, and to form healthy identities;
- caregivers who are fully informed about the child and engaged as healing agents; and
- self-awareness of personal loss and grief experiences as they may enhance or be a barrier to helping children and families deal with their losses and grief

An adoption competent child welfare professional is skilled in:

- using attachment-based casework approaches and techniques that assist children to understand their past experiences and build new, healthy family relationships;
- using casework strategies and tools to facilitate children's processing of loss and grief;
- using casework practices that mitigate the harm from trauma, prevent re-traumatization and build strengths and resilience;
- using culturally appropriate casework tools and strategies with children and caregivers that promote healthy identity formation and address issues of race culture, and diversity;
- engaging and assisting parents to use therapeutic parenting strategies;
- using casework strategies that foster cooperative, collaborative, and healthy relationships between adoptive/guardianship families and birth family members;
- identifying qualified and appropriate mental health professionals, making effective referrals, setting appropriate treatment expectations, and assuring that caregivers are involved in the treatment process;
- collaborating effectively with interdisciplinary and interagency teams; and
- working with adoptive and guardianship families to assure they have a team of formal and informal supports around them before and after permanency is achieved.