

Core Clinical Issues in Adoption and Their Link to Mental Health

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This lesson is: Core Clinical Issues in Adoption and Their Link to Mental Health.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objective

The objective for this lesson is to identify the salient clinical issues associated with the various adoption and guardianship options.

2. Psychological Challenges Common in Adoption

2.1 Psychological Challenges Common in Adoption

While adoption has many benefits, it brings challenges in the lives of adopted individuals and their birth and adoptive parents. Remember, one of the guiding principles we reviewed in Lesson 2 was *Adoption is a lifelong process that impacts the individual throughout their lifespan.*

Let's now consider some of the psychological challenges common in adoption and guardianship.

2.2 Frameworks for Understanding Adoption Issues

We will start with a conceptual framework for understanding adoption issues. "The Seven Core Issues in Adoption" were developed by Sharon Kaplan Roszia, MS and Deborah Silverstein, MSW. They were later expanded into a book entitled "Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency" with Allison Davis Maxon, LMFT that includes thinking on foster care, kinship families, and third-party reproduction.

For additional information, see the accompanying handout linked below.

2.3 Seven Core Issues in Adoption

The seven core issues in adoption have meaning for all members of the adoption kinship network, as well as extended family members. Over the course of their lives, adoptees, birth families, and adoptive families may experience challenges related to these issues and are faced with exploring their meaning and integrating them throughout their life journey.

Let's look at this framework graphically. This graphic depicts the central issue of loss, surrounded by six other issues:

- Rejection
- Shame and guilt
- Grief
- Intimacy
- Identity, and
- Mastery and control

The way in which individuals experience and understand these issues can impact their adjustment, self-esteem, and identity. Of course, these issues are interconnected and influence one another.

Let's briefly discuss each of these salient issues. To follow the interaction in the correct order, always click on the green oval.

3. Loss

3.1 Losses Connected with Adoption

Loss is a central issue in adoption - adoption is created through loss; and without loss, there is no adoption. It is hard for those who are not adopted to understand the full extent of loss experienced by adopted persons.

Dr. David Brodzinsky delineates a range of losses connected with adoption. These losses may be acute for children separated from birth parents at an older age, or may be felt more gradually for infant adoptees. Click each shape to hear some of these losses.

- Loss of birth parents, siblings, and other extended family
- Loss of previous caregivers and attachment figures for those placed beyond early infancy
- Loss of status (being adopted is different)
- Loss of fit in the adoptive family
- Loss of genealogical continuity and biological connection to adoptive family
- Loss of community and heritage
- Loss of privacy, especially when adoption is conspicuous as in adoption across groups or countries
- Loss of information about themselves and their origins

3.2 Challenges to Resolving Loss

There are many aspects of adoption loss that make it more difficult to resolve:

- Ambiguity surrounding the finality of the loss.
- The lack of society's recognition of adoption loss.
- The dearth of opportunities for grief work.
- Adoptees' ambivalent feelings toward their birth parents.
- Missing or inadequate information to make sense of loss.

Loss becomes particularly salient for children placed at older ages who have experienced many losses and traumatic separations. Youth typically have not been helped to mourn their losses, which can contribute to ongoing emotional challenges.

3.3 Identifying Layers of Losses Video

Let's listen to Veronica, who was placed for adoption at 6 weeks of age, as she describes aspects of her experience. As you listen, identify the types of losses and related issues she mentions and jot these down. These are excerpts from a 30-minute video, which can be accessed in total at the link in the Resources tab.

[Video Transcript]

VERONICA: I remember that I was in my room, and I think I was probably around 5 or 6 years old. I know I was in kindergarten when they told me. I don't remember a whole lot of details, but I do remember them telling me that I was adopted and somebody gave me up to give me a better life.

I never heard them speak badly about my birth mother. It was more like, "She gave you up so you could have a better life." But I do remember from that point on, it did make more sense to me because I always felt kind of strange. Like I just knew something was different.

And when I was at school on the playground, I remember - like every other kid, you get teased by different kids. But when you're adopted and you get teased, you think that maybe that's the reason that you were put up for adoption, that something was wrong with you. When kids make fun of you, the way you look, how you act, it's like, "Well, what's wrong with me? Is this why my real mommy didn't want me?" That's exactly what I remember thinking when I was 5 or 6 years old in kindergarten.

My family is African-American, but they're mixed with a lot of different things. Like my grandparents were Creoles, which back then in New Orleans Creoles meant that they were free black people of color. They were mixed with a lot of different things, but they were also very fair complexioned. They did have more of the European-dominated features, like my mom did. My dad was more my complexion but he had greenish, grayish eyes.

So it was a little weird for me growing up, especially being in a family where you saw that our features were so different. Being African-American, we come in all different varieties and skin tones and skin complexions and all sorts of different things. And I had more African-dominated features, I guess you could say, and my parents didn't. So it did give me a low self-esteem for most of my life. It made me feel unattractive and it only intensified that fact that I needed to know where I came from and who I was.

When I was in school, a friend of my family's, a friend of mine, told my teacher I was adopted, so she told me I couldn't do the family tree project because I had no family. And, of course, I went home and told my parents. I don't really remember a whole lot of what happened after that, but I do remember my mom went to the school. I don't imagine it was pretty. But it's just little things like that that they don't understand why you have that strong desire to know because everything in your whole life has just been kept from you and hidden from you.

I remember there were times in high school that I would go in my room, and there was a paper that my mother gave me when I was younger when I asked her, "What does my mother look like? What does my father--? Who are these people?" And she handed me a paper that she got in 1981 from the Volunteers of America. And this is what it had on it. And this is all it was. And it says, Background information: female born - the day I was born. It says my birth information, my weight, my length. It says a little bit of information about the natural mother and the natural father.

But this is all it was. So there would be times when I was a teenager, and I would go in my room and I would pull this paper out and I would just stare at it. And I would just wonder, "Who are these people? This could be anybody."

When I was in high school, I used to, like most teenaged girls, I would have sleepovers by other friends' houses. And when I was around like their families, especially them with their moms, just to see the similarities and how different their family unit was and how they felt more like, I guess, meshed together. I don't know if that's how you would say it. But I wanted to be a part of something like that so, so bad.

And my parents loved me, and there were good times but there were also some bad times. Things that were said to me in my family that made me feel more and more like I did not fit in, like I was adopted.

My dad would say things to me when he would get really angry. One time he said I couldn't call him Dad, I couldn't call my mom Mom, when he was very, very angry. And my parents were probably frustrated because they didn't know what was going on with me. I was frustrated. I was angry because I felt different. I felt unloved. I felt unwanted and they didn't know how to deal with that.

[END OF VIDEO]

3.4 Identifying Layers of Losses Reflection

Which of the losses mentioned earlier were apparent in Veronica's experience? Click all that apply.

- Loss of birth parents, siblings, and other extended family
- Loss of previous caregivers and attachment figures for those placed beyond early infancy
- Loss of status (being an adoptee is different from most others)
- Loss of fit in the adoptive family
- Loss of genealogical continuity and biological connection to adoptive family
- Loss of community and heritage
- Loss of sense of connectedness
- Loss of information about self and origins

3.5 Identifying Layers of Losses Response

Almost all of them are referred to in some form, except for the loss of previous caregivers.

Veronica also discusses the pain of feeling rejected by her birth mother. She expressed the ongoing struggles in her adoptive family, including not feeling like she was part of them, not being understood or feeling consistently and unconditionally loved, and feeling that something was wrong with her.

As we move through the next slides, think about how Veronica's feelings align with the seven core issues in adoption.

4. Rejection and Abandonment

4.1 Messages to Children

At the heart of loss for adopted individuals is another core issue - the perception (or reality) that they were abandoned ... given away ... rejected. The implicit message in abandonment is, "You are not important or valued." In an earlier era, parents told their adopted children stories of how their parents picked them out from a nursery of available babies, and little, if anything, about why they were not with their birth parents.

Later, explanations such as "Your mother was too poor," "She loved you so much," or "She wanted a better life for you" may have sufficed when the child was a preschooler, but by middle childhood, youth had come to understand that there was another side to the story. Unlike most other youth, they were not kept. This realization brings about questions of, "Why didn't they want me?" and feelings of being inadequate, unworthy, or unlovable.

5. Shame and Guilt

5.1 Shame

Two related issues are shame and guilt. Shame is an overwhelming emotion that goes to the core of one's being: *"I am an inferior person."*

Children and youth often struggle with making sense of the fact that they are not being cared for by their birth parents. They think, *"Most parents keep their kids. What was wrong with me? It had to be something about me. Maybe I was not pretty. Maybe I cried too much as a baby."*

Many adoptees talk about feeling like second-class citizens and different from most of the rest of the world. Some youth who had difficult early lives feel embarrassed or humiliated by their pasts, and may wonder if they will become like their birth parents. Sometimes shame can stem from feeling that they never measured up to the child their adoptive parents wanted, that they were never good enough.

5.2 Guilt

Unlike shame, guilt is more focused on specific actions: *"I did something wrong, something to cause the relinquishment."*

Children and youth removed from their parents may feel guilty for telling others about the abuse or for other reasons assume responsibility for the outcome: *"Maybe I should not have told the nurse at school about the marks on my leg."*

Children and youth in foster care removed from their birth families may experience guilt when leaving siblings or a parent, particularly if they feel a responsibility to them. Additionally, divided loyalties to birth and adoptive families are linked with guilt, such as guilt for thinking so much about birth family or wanting to search when they have loving adoptive parents.

5.3 Negative Experiences of Adoptees

Feelings of shame or inadequacy are magnified when adopted youth are treated differently by others, experiencing adoption-related comments, behaviors, or attitudes ranging from unintentionally hurtful to blatantly aggressive.

A study of adopted adults found that some reported extended family members as the most common source of adoption-related rejection; while other adopted adults reported classmates and strangers as the most frequent sources.

5.4 Adoption Stigma Reflection

Adoption stigma is ever present. Many movies, media stories, and other outlets reinforce adoption stigma. For example, note the messages in this real-life Valentine's Day card.

"Sis, even if you were adopted, I'd still love you...not that you are, of course. At least I don't think so. But, come to think of it, you don't really look like Mom and Dad. Gee, maybe you should get a DNA test or something. Oh well, don't worry about it. We all love you, even if your real parents don't. Happy Valentine's Day."

What are the negative messages conveyed here?

5.5 Adoption Stigma Reflection

You may have come up with: adopted children aren't worthy of love, weren't loved by their birth parents, are second class, and adoptive parents aren't real parents.

5.6 Coming to Terms with Feelings of Rejection and Shame

When parents keep secrets from their kids, it contributes to their feelings of rejection and shame.

Consider this real-life example shared by an adoption therapist:

Adoptive parents involved in family counseling with their 12-year-old daughter, Dianne, had reported privately to the therapist that they had a letter from the birth mom to their daughter that they had never shared with her.

The therapist planned a conjoint session in which they shared the letter with Dianne. After reading the letter, the therapist asked Dianne what she had learned from the letter that she didn't already know. She said, *"She tried to care for me, but couldn't. She really did love me, but made the decision to place me for adoption."*

5.7 Coming to Terms with Feelings of Rejection and Shame Reflection

You can see from this example how what seemed like a little piece of information to the adoptive parents was so meaningful to Dianne because it decreased her sense of shame and rejection.

If you were working with Dianne's parents, what would you say to help them understand why sharing this earlier would have been important?

5.8 Coming to Terms with Feelings of Rejection and Shame Response

More often than not, you will have adoptive parents in your practice who have protected information and are reluctant to share it for a variety of reasons. We know from training other therapists that the conversation with parents around missing information is a difficult one. Let's listen to this conversation in hopes it will give you some ideas in your therapeutic work.

Therapist: *"Sam and Linda, we've been working together for a couple weeks, and Dianne continues to share her struggle with the underpinnings of rejection and shame associated with her relinquishment. I'm hoping that together, we can revisit what you know about her adoption story and the reasons she was placed, so that I can help you share with her the information she desperately seeks. Maybe we can also talk about what fears you may have about sharing this information and what impact it might have on Dianne or your relationship with her."*

This might be scary for you, but I can tell you this exploration and sharing is normal and healthy for the adoptive families I have worked with. I can also tell you from doing this work with so many children, like Dianne, that providing them with answers to their questions helps to alleviate their sense of shame, low self-esteem, fears, and the anxieties that this uncertainty brings.

Is there information you have that hasn't been shared with Dianne yet?"

Mom: *"We have a letter from her birth mother but we thought we would wait and give it to her when she was 18."*

Therapist: *"Can you tell me what will be different for Dianne at age 18?"*

Dad: *"Well, we thought she would be better equipped to handle the information then. I'm afraid if we give her the letter now, she'll want to meet her birth mother."*

Therapist: *"I understand why you might think that, but Dianne is really struggling now about getting some of these answers. I think she would greatly benefit from having the letter. Knowing why she was placed for adoption will also allow me to help her to manage her feelings and thoughts about her own story."*

5.9 Tasks for Overcoming Guilt and Shame

Click each shape to hear what needs to happen for an adoptee to come to terms with the meaning of their adoption and counteract feelings of rejection and shame.

1. Adoptees need to understand the reasons underlying their relinquishment or termination of their parents' rights.
2. They need to be able to seek answers to their questions and explore their feelings of sadness, anger, shame, and guilt.
3. Their sense of personal inadequacy based on being relinquished for adoption needs to be challenged through education and normalizing their experience.
4. They need to be helped to recognize that relinquishment or termination of parental rights is due to adult situations and choices and that they are not responsible.
5. Hearing from other adoptees about their struggles and experiences also helps them gain a more reality-based understanding.

6. Grief

6.1 Grief in Adopted Individuals

Another one of the seven core issues is grief. Every adopted person experiences grief in their own unique way. Children express grief differently than adults. Often, you will see this presented behaviorally and in spurts. Emotions surrounding grief may include sadness and depression, confusion, anxiety, fear of future abandonment, helplessness to understand the loss, and anger or rage.

Many youth are disconnected from their feelings or express them through acting-out behaviors. Some adopted individuals experience occasional and moderate feelings of grief, while others may have nearly constant and deeply felt grief reactions.

Grief may be compared to waves in an ocean. When it is most intense, the waves are large and can knock you down, but as the loss is mourned, the waves become smaller and further apart.

6.2 Supporting Grief Work

For many of the children you'll be working with, they have not been afforded the opportunity either clinically or through support of significant others to express and mourn their losses. You may be the first person doing this grief work with them and your understanding and ability to address this is essential to their well-being. We will discuss this further in the module on Loss and Grief.

7. Intimacy and Attachment Challenges

7.1 Children Struggle with Intimacy

A struggle with intimacy is another core issue for many children and youth who are adopted. The power of the loss and perceived rejection impact the ability to create intimacy. So, the dance that is created is wanting to be close, but fearing that people are going to leave.

Closeness may be associated with pain and loss. While a child or youth craves closeness, it may scare them. Unresolved losses and grief also can pose barriers in new relationships.

7.2 Attachment Video

Listen to Ryan talk about the challenges that he has experienced with opening himself up in relationships, and how he relates it to his adoption journey.

[Video Transcript]

RYAN: I'm not good at self-psychology, but my relationships with people, how I think my adoption has played a part in that, I would say I'm very candid if you ask me something. I'm very open, but I'm also not one to just let people close to me. And I think that stems from just being bullied a lot as a kid. I tend to shut people out, and I have a few close friends but the ones that I do have are very close to me. And I think that boils down to just a self-defense mechanism I developed as a kid.

I would say it does have a lot to do with trust, as far as creating boundaries between myself and others before they can try to damage me.

[END OF VIDEO]

7.3 Adults Struggle with Intimacy

Parents who don't understand the struggles their children are experiencing may take their child's rejection of intimacy or affection personally. They may then pull away, further complicating the attachment process.

Remember Veronica and how she described her longing for the kind of closeness she observed in her friends' families? She later stated that she never experienced this in her adoptive family, and the closest she came was a relationship with her grandmother, who died when she was a young child.

8. Identity

8.1 Identity Narratives

The development of one's identity is complicated by the experience of adoption and guardianship and the need to integrate aspects of their unique story, their birth family, and adoptive or guardianship families.

Narratives are the primary way individuals construct and express meaning and the central way we organize and remember experiences.

As they develop, adoptees need to be helped to develop a coherent personal narrative that incorporates the complex aspects of their history and recognizes positive qualities they received from their birth and adoptive families. Youth often need to be helped to understand significant aspects of their history and their own strengths.

8.2 The Role of Stories in Understanding the Reasons for One's Adoption

Click the page curl to begin learning about the role of stories in understanding the reasons for one's adoption.

Introduction: Stories explain difficult themes, such as abandonment and loss of one's birth family.

Mythology and folklore: There are many stories that have been passed down through mythology and folklore of child abandonment and rescue. The Biblical story of Moses is an example of an adoption narrative that explains why he was not kept by his birth mother.

Stories do not integrate: Even today, the stories that many children adopted as infants are told do not integrate their birth family and the real reasons for their adoption. Even worse, they may not be true. For example, telling a child that her mother loved her so much that she wanted her to have a better life may seem positive, and it may even be the truth, but it doesn't help her to understand or integrate her adoption story.

Reasons for providing explanations: In some cases, adults provide these types of explanations to avoid addressing the real, sometimes messier and difficult-to-explain reasons behind the voluntary or involuntary relinquishment.

Children adopted at older ages: Additionally, even when children adopted at older ages have the information, they are not necessarily helped to develop their narrative.

8.3 Missing Pieces Narrative

An adoptee, who is also a social worker in her 50s, described her life as a jigsaw puzzle with about 15 to 20 missing pieces. She said that whenever she looked at the puzzle, her eyes always went first to the missing pieces.

Lack of connection to one's past complicates identity formation. Some adoptees describe feeling like an alien, because they are cut off from their past, and lack basic information about themselves and their adoption. They may have a sense of not being real and struggle with feelings of being and looking different. There also may be a sense of duality between what they seem like on the outside versus what they are feeling on the inside.

8.4 Stephanie's Adoption Challenges Video

Listen to Stephanie talk about the challenges she experienced as an adoptee during her teen years.

[Video Transcript]

STEPHANIE: High school was really hard for me. Teenagers were really hard for me. I had all these friends who would rebel against their parents, right, or their family, because they looked like them and, "How dare that be!" And so the way they'd kind of rebel is to be the opposite of that.

Boy, I was jealous of that because here I had these parents, this family that looked nothing like me to begin with. So I really had - I didn't know who I was or even have some solid grounding which to rebel against. So I remember that I tried on things for sizes. I always felt like I was kind of on probationary status with this family, although they were lovely, but it was my issue.

I was trying very hard to figure out who I was, and there was nothing around me that was similar in order to figure that out. Nothing that was like me. No mirror, of sorts. So I stressed out. I was a kid who tried - I tried on lots of identities, maybe, lots of faces and masks and sizes.

And I remember with the temporary status that I felt, this probationary status that I felt in this world that I inhabited, I was a people-pleaser, so whatever you needed I would give you.

And so I do this differently with all these people, and it just got to me. Yeah, it just got to me and I remembered almost kind of snapping.

And I was in therapy all throughout high school because I don't think my parents knew what to do with my stress or my lack of feeling calm and at home in my own body. But no one mentioned adoption, nobody. I had talked to the high school counselor. I was with a couple of different therapists. Nobody every thought the adoption was a deal, not one single person.

[END OF VIDEO]

8.5 Stephanie's Adoption Challenges Reflection

As Stephanie's words resonate, "No one ever mentioned adoption," we, as therapists, must commit to embracing the emotional significance of adoption in identity and be comfortable bringing the issue into the therapeutic relationship.

Imagine you are working with Stephanie as a teenager. What might you say to open up the conversation about the role adoption might play in her identity challenges?

8.6 Stephanie's Adoption Challenges Response

You might have said something along the lines of:

"Stephanie, I'm wondering if you think being adopted has anything to do with this restlessness you're describing. What do you think about that?"

"It sounds like you're struggling with your identity, who you are, who you're like, or who you want to be. Adoption often makes this a much harder process for young people. Can we talk about that?"

We'll delve deeper into the complexities of adoption and identity in a later module.

9. Mastery and Control Issues

9.1 Impact of Adoption on Mastery

The last of the seven core issues is mastery and control. Mastery is about feeling in control and having power to influence things around you, something that is often compromised for children and youth who have experienced adoption and guardianship.

Even though adoption and guardianship can be very positive experiences, nonetheless, they greatly alter one's life course, with children and youth having no real choice in the matter. These experiences may intensify their sense of powerlessness and need to exert control. This can lead to anger, depression, and externalizing behavior as well.

9.2 Survival Behaviors

The concept of "survival behaviors" is used commonly in reframing some of the acting out behaviors of youth.

It is important to remember that many of these behaviors were functional when the child or youth was in a different environment. However, the same behaviors may be problematic in the new environment.

For example, a child may have been threatened to not tell the truth by an abuser and carries that behavior into their new home. Or, a teenager with no reason to trust adults after years of neglect and multiple moves may resist closeness and push people away for self-protection. These behaviors may have been, or continue to feel, protective to the child or youth, but they are not conducive to building relationships or attachment with adoptive parents.

As a result, these behaviors are often counterproductive for them and misunderstood by parents and others who don't view the behaviors in the context of the child's history.

10. Conclusion

10.1 Wrapping Up

We will delve deeper into many of these core clinical issues throughout the training, as well as strategies and interventions to help you address them. We hope that you, as a mental health professional, will incorporate the exploration of these core issues during assessment and throughout treatment when working with children, teens, and young adults whose lives have been impacted by the emotional significance of adoption.

10.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

10.3 Journal Response

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

10.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

10.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have now completed this module.

In the next module, we will focus on understanding the factors that shape adoption adjustment and key insights underlying adoption competent assessment and intervention.