

Course Overview and the Need for Adoption

1. Introduction and Objectives

1.1 Introduction

Welcome to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals. This training is brought to you through a cooperative agreement between the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) and the Children's Bureau. This module is "A Case for Adoption Competency." This lesson is "Course Overview and the Need for Adoption Competence."

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

The objectives for this lesson are to:

- Acquire appropriate expectations for this course based on an accurate understanding of the focus, nature, and main goals of the training, and
- Identify core knowledge, values, and skills that characterize an adoption competent mental health professional

2. Overview

2.1 Section 2: Overview

This training is designed to enhance the capacity of mental health professionals to understand and address the complex mental health needs of children and youth.

2.2 Welcome: Debbie Riley, C.A.S.E. CEO/Co-Founder

We will focus on children and youth in foster care, kinship care, and those who have found permanency through adoption or guardianship, whether from foster care in the U.S., from other countries, or through private domestic adoption. Let's start with a brief introduction from Debbie Riley, CEO and co-founder of C.A.S.E, the lead agency for this training initiative.

[Video Transcript]

DEBBIE RILEY: Hello, I'm Debbie Riley, CEO of the Center for Adoption Support and Education, C.A.S.E. I'd like to welcome you to a very important, exciting initiative, the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative, NTI. This training funded through the Children's Bureau, Administration on Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services is intended to improve the wellbeing outcomes for children and youth who have foster care, adoption, guardianship, and kinship care. It also provides support and appropriate therapeutic interventions to ensure stable and secure post permanency experiences for children and families from all adoption experiences.

Research and practice supports that mental health services are one of the greatest unmet needs for these families. At the same time, there is a dearth of specially trained mental health providers to meet this growing need.

The feedback from families is really clear, they want competent mental health services from practitioners that truly understood the nuances of what it means to experience:

- *Traumatic beginnings*
- *The impact of separation from family*
- *The importance of their stories*
- *How to manage profound loss and grief, and*
- *The complexities of one's identity formation*

They also want mental health professionals to give them the tools to parent children successfully, to understand that adoptive parenting is different than biological parenting, and most importantly, not to be blamed for things that they weren't responsible for.

Through this innovative training, Mental Health Practitioners in all states, and tribes, and territories will have access to standardized, web-based, evidence-informed training. By providing you with a specialized lens in adoption competency, we believe you will be more effective in supporting children and families, enhancing your skills in clinical assessments, treatment planning, and evidenced informed interventions.

If you're a seasoned therapist, this training will heighten and broaden the skills and knowledge that you already have, adding a new layer of expertise to your practice. And, for those of you that are newer - welcome. This training will provide you with an innovative toolkit of skills and strategies to build your practice with this population.

C.A.S.E. has had the honor of building an array of adoption-competent mental health services responding to an unmet need voiced by foster, kinship, and adoptive families all across our country. As a clinician myself, I have seen the positive outcomes when this knowledge is infused into clinical practice.

Together, we can build the capacity to meet the growing needs of families we serve, and ultimately improve the outcomes for the children we all so desperately care about. Thank you so much for taking this training and being part of this important community.

[End of Video]

2.3 Training Overview

[Video Transcript]

The National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals consists of nine modules, each with a varying number of lessons for approximately 20-25 hours of training depending on the pace of your learning.

The content of this training focuses on knowledge, values, and skills that you can integrate into your practice, broadening your understanding and assessment of children's complex mental health needs to choose interventions that are most likely to be effective, and to address key issues within the family.

Each module includes a pre-test and a post test. Trainees who score 80 percent on the post test will receive a certificate of completion. Continuing education credits may be provided, based on your state and your licensing board.

This training was originally piloted in 2018 with more than 2,800 mental health professionals across the country with significant knowledge gains in all modules, with the greatest gains seen in the module on attachment. This training has been provided to thousands more since it was launched nationally. We are excited that this version of the training includes updated content to reflect changes in the field and includes more of a focus on lived experience.

There are a few things to note about the training content, design, and platform. Every effort has been made to accommodate different learning styles within the constraints of a web-based platform. As part of this, we have included a PDF of the transcript in the Resources tab which you can download and annotate, or print out for note-taking. We also include handouts, web links, and other resource materials to supplement the content. These can all be found in the Resources tab. Unless otherwise specified, these are not required reading for the training.

There are times when we utilize reflection questions which you are asked to type in a response. Please note that these responses are not scored or recorded and are designed to reinforce your learning. There are also times when we introduce an intervention or a model as a framework for treatment. When this occurs, it is intended to expand your knowledge and familiarize you with potential treatment models to use with the population. It is not intended to train you in that model. If you are interested in a particular intervention or model, you are encouraged to use the links or resources we provide to seek out additional information. Google and other search engines are a great way to further explore any content within the training.

Finally, as with any training that addresses trauma, loss, grief, and other powerful issues, this content can be triggering. When this occurs, seek support and engage in self-care. We address some of these strategies in the training, but would suggest that you utilize outside supports to take a break when you deem it necessary.

There is also an NTI web-based training designed for Child Welfare Professionals, which is focused on adoption and mental health competent casework practices for children, youth, and families. Both curricula have an emphasis on practices that promote positive identity, attachment capacity, understanding of the impact of trauma, and healing from loss and trauma with the training for mental health clinicians focused on clinical practice.

This training complements, and is consistent in its values and beliefs with, existing child welfare permanency planning practice and current knowledge regarding mental health.

[End of Video]

2.4 Framework

This course by itself does not make a professional “adoption competent”; but, rather, it is a framework of specialized knowledge and practice strategies that builds upon the foundation provided by your professional training.

This course will give you an awareness of the complexities of adoption and guardianship and the factors that interact to shape a child’s or youth’s adjustment and mental health needs. Over time, you can build on this framework through continuing education in adoption competency, supervision, and practice experience.

3. Adoption Competent Services

3.1 Section 3: Adoption Competent Services

Adoption is a more complex way to form a family and adoptive families face experiences and challenges that are different from families formed through birth. Let’s explore these unique differences.

3.2 Powerful Experience

Adoption is a powerful human experience with unique issues for adopted individuals and members of their birth and adoptive families. It touches on universal themes of creating life, abandonment and loss, personal identity, and a sense of belonging.

3.3 Life Cycle

Many experts have identified a range of issues that surface throughout the life cycle for members of the adoption kinship network as they address emotional aspects of adoption. We will explore these psychological themes later in this training, as well as the normative developmental challenges confronting adoptees and their families.

In addition, other issues such as the impact of the child’s or youth’s past experiences, parents coping with infertility and other losses, or issues of difference, identity formation, and belonging add additional layers of complexity.

3.4 Normative Challenges

Many adopted children and their parents can cope with the normative challenges without seeking professional help. However, those impacted by adverse early life experiences may need specialized adoption competent mental health services. And yet, many mental health professionals do not understand the significance of adoption or guardianship in the lives of their clients and its connections to other aspects of their struggles.

3.5 Dr. David Brodzinsky

Sadly, research tells us that many adoptive and guardianship families do not feel that they are getting the help and understanding they need to maximize their success in parenting their children either before or after adoption or guardianship.

Please listen to this brief clip of Dr. David Brodzinsky, a clinical psychologist and adoption scholar, explaining the rationale for this training.

[Video Transcript]

DAVID BRODZINSKY, PH.D.: Well, as someone who's been involved in training clinicians around adoption or foster care issues for a long time, it's probably 25 to 30 years now, one of the things that I've come to learn is that most clinicians don't know what they don't know.

They get good training typically. They may well be excellent clinicians, but the complexities that adoptive families face are not taught in graduate school. Adoption is not a topic that typically is part of our clinical curriculum, even in social work. A little bit here and there, but the complexities, no.

So one of the things that is important for them to realize is the sheer nature of what adoption is, the process involved, the complexities that these families face in becoming parents. What the child has been through as they have been moved either voluntarily or not from the biological family into sometimes foster families, and another foster family and then another foster family, and finally end up into an adoptive home.

Or what it's like for a child who grows up for the first year or so in an orphanage where they experience congregate care but not really one-on-one parent-child care and then enter their adoptive family. So there's so much in the dynamics of adoption that are critical, that's critical for clinicians to know about that they simply don't have training in.

There's no question in my mind that clinicians, if they want to be adoption competent clinicians, need to have specialized training. There's a body of knowledge that needs to be integrated together for them to be able to approach these families in not only clinically effective ways but sensitive ways understanding what these families have gone through, understand what the children have gone through.

I think parents very often are aware when they're working with someone who's adoption competent. They sense the empathy of the clinician with regard to what they've gone through. The children sense an empathy for what they've gone through. There has been a lot of families that I've worked with over the years that have come to me after working with other clinicians who they've been very dissatisfied with. Sometimes they've been given information that they feel has been simply wrong, sometimes insulting.

Sometimes the clinicians have gone so far as to say, "Well, why don't you return the child to the agency?" A comment that doesn't represent knowledge of the adoption process.

[End of Video]

3.6 Handouts

There is an article in the Resources tab by Dr. Brodzinsky, titled *A Need to Know: Enhancing Adoption Competence Among Mental Health Professionals*. While this article was written a number of years ago, the teachings are relevant today. We will briefly review some of the primary reasons that Dr. Brodzinsky advances for why specialized training is essential for counseling professionals to meet the needs of individuals and families.

Throughout this curriculum, you will see an icon on the screen to notify you when there is a handout for you to view in the Resources tab. Click on the icon to view the handout.

4. Research and Data

4.1 Section 4: Research and Data

As we consider the clinical approaches, it is critical to explore the research that substantiates the need for adoption competence.

4.2 Seeking Services

Research indicates that adoptive families are three to five times more likely to seek mental health or other counseling services for their children, and at least seven to ten times more likely to seek residential treatment than are birth families.

This difference may be due to a greater willingness to seek help, due to the child's early life experiences, or normative concerns around adoption adjustment, such as losses inherent in adoption, identity, adoption across groups, or many other issues.

4.3 Challenges for Adopted Children and Youth and Treatment Implications

For many of the children and youth with whom you work, the challenges may seem overwhelming and clinically complex.

We are now going to explore some of the challenges and the treatment implications. Click on each box to learn more.

Identifying Challenges: Identifying the range of challenges that a child or youth is experiencing and their underlying causes is extremely complex. Often there is sparse, if any, information available about their early experiences. Also, standard diagnostic categories frequently do not capture the breadth of their mental health and developmental needs.

Placement Experiences: Often children's and youth's developmental and mental health challenges are compounded by their placement experiences. They bring with them much emotional baggage and the coping skills they developed to survive their early adverse life experiences, including multiple moves and caretakers, abuse experiences, and separation from siblings. Too often, they have developed maladaptive coping skills that create barriers to their adjustment with their adoptive and guardianship families.

Poor Outcomes: Even more troubling for children and youth involved in foster care is that the available evidence indicates that those who receive mental health services while in care generally do not benefit from them. A study using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that the use of outpatient mental health services had no statistically significant impact on either externalizing or internalizing behavior problems. Possible factors contributing to their failure to improve include lack of access to high quality adoption competent mental health outpatient services, ongoing instability, and failure of the therapist to use evidence-based treatments with fidelity.

4.4 Graduate Training Activity

Let's look at how much graduate training you had in serving this population. Enter the amount of time any of your undergraduate or graduate classes focused on issues of adoption by entering a number, then clicking Submit.

4.5 Education

What we know from published surveys is that few clinicians receive specialized training to serve children and youth and their foster, adoptive, and guardianship families. Counseling professionals indicated that they need more knowledge of adoption-related issues. Here are two additional examples:

- A national survey of licensed psychologists found that two-thirds of the respondents reported having no graduate coursework that dealt with adoption issues.
- A survey of clinical psychology professors reported that the average time spent teaching about adoption was eight minutes per semester, as compared to three to ten times that amount of time spent on subjects that impact far fewer people.

This indicates a significant need for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and family therapists to understand the issues and dynamics that are intrinsic to adoption competent clinical work.

4.6 Competent Therapists

Additionally, many families report that they have had to teach therapists about how issues related to adoption and guardianship - such as trust, loss, rejection, identity, and divided loyalties - have a significant impact on children's behavioral and emotional challenges. Some families have reported seeing eight to ten different therapists before finding one with the necessary adoption competence to help them.

4.7 Parents Talk about Unhelpful Help

Click each parent for examples of comments by therapists that were unhelpful or unsupportive.

"They failed to validate or believe my experiences."

"I felt blamed for everything."

"They did not understand adoption issues."

"They failed to include me in my child's treatment."

"They told me to just 'give my child back.'"

4.8 Children and Youth Talk about Unhelpful Help

Now, click the images to learn what children and youth have said about their therapy experiences.

"No one ever talked about adoption"

"When I brought up things I lost, they talked about all that I was gaining."

"They made me feel bad about wanting to talk about my birth parents."

"They told me to be grateful."

4.9 The Impact of Unmet Mental Health Needs

When clinicians lack adoption competency, treatment is compromised. When mental health needs are not successfully addressed, they are likely to derail normal child development, impede the achievement of permanency, and create severe parenting difficulties and stress throughout their families. When these families cannot stabilize and successfully parent their children, either they continue living in severe stress and crisis for many years or children leave their families, temporarily or permanently.

5. The Impact of Adoption Competent Practice

5.1 Section 5: The Impact of Adoption Competent Practice

In this section, let's talk about improving the outcomes of adoption and guardianship. We will listen to Cathy, an adoptive parent, talk about getting the help she needed.

5.2 Cathy's Experience as an Adoptive Mother

[Video Transcript]

CATHY: Between the ages of eight and twelve I think were the most difficult times initially. During those years, we did not have adoption-competent therapists. We saw therapists through our HMO program who--I think this woman was really a very strong therapist but she did not know about the particular losses and trauma that are involved in adoption.

And so I think our daughter and we weren't getting what we needed in terms of being held really strongly with an understanding of how our family, with an adopted child, of a different race, from the parents and biological children in the family. We just had different issues and people didn't seem to know how to help us.

[End of Video]

5.3 Adoption Competent Mental Health Professional

As you heard from Cathy, having an adoption competent therapist can make the difference for families. Let's look together at the definition and key characteristics of an adoption competent mental health professional, developed by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) and vetted by national experts. Take a minute to review the definition in the handout: *Adoption Competent Mental Health Practice*.

The adoption competent professional has the requisite qualifications to provide mental health clinical services, as well as the specific knowledge, values, and skills important for effective help with adopted children, youth, and their families.

On the next few slides, please take a minute to answer the following questions.

5.4 Areas of Knowledge Reflection

What would you consider to be important areas of knowledge for adoption competent practice? Check all that apply.

- Understanding the different types of adoptive and guardianship families
- The clinical issues associated with adoption and with early adverse experiences in children
- Issues and helping strategies surrounding attachment, identity formation, trauma, and loss and grief
- Understanding the developmental stages of adoption, and
- The importance of birth family connections

5.5 Areas of Knowledge Response

You should have selected all of these, as they form the essential foundation for adoption competent practice. Let's listen to Penny, an adoption competent therapist talk about how critical this knowledge is to her practice.

[Video Transcript]

PENNY: I believe that the main competencies that are essential to doing quality work with adopted children starts with attachment. Really understanding how attachment is formed, how it's nurtured, the crucial stages developmentally when there are windows, if you will, for attachment.

Another really important thing is neurobiology, understanding child development and what happens in the brain when they change caretakers or they experience maltreatment. Even for children that have a fairly stable foster care or orphanage experience are still leaving everything that they've ever known. Their food is different. The air smells different. Their clothing is different. The people that are taking care of them, the faces look different. And all of that has an effect on the brain that the child continues to carry with them. So I think that's also very crucial to understand in working with this population.

Another thing I think that's really important is the concept of ambiguous loss: that for these children there's a huge loss but it's not like for an adult, for example, if you lose somebody to death you know they're gone and you have an understanding of that. But for these children they know they've lost biological family, but they don't know if they're still alive, "Are they missing me?" "Do I have siblings?" I think that bit is also extremely important for a therapist to be aware of.

[End of Video]

5.6 Values Reflection

What do you see as the values underlying adoption competent practice?

- Values that affirm a family-based, strengths-based, and family systems approach to working with families
- Sensitivity to issues of belonging
- Embracing the value of permanency
- Maintaining beneficial connections for children and youth

5.7 Values Response

In addition to sound professional ethics, all of these are essential.

Also critically important is the understanding that adoption is a significant, life-changing experience and adoptive parenting is different than parenting by birth.

5.8 Skills Reflection

What skills would you consider most important?

- Conducting adoption competent assessments, including skills in helping children and youth tell and understand their life stories
- Trauma and attachment-focused treatment
- Teaching therapeutic parenting strategies, and
- Advocacy

5.9 Skills Response

All of these skills are paramount in engaging adopted children, youth, and families.

Also critically important is:

- The ability to work with a range of issues and differences among people
- Respect for all
- Using positive language, and
- Loss and grief work with children and youth

[Video Transcript]

PENNY: Well, when thinking about the difference between therapeutic work and adoption competent work, the first thing that comes to my mind is the difference in the lens with which I'm looking at the child and the family. When I'm doing adoption competent work, it's a much more complex view and I'm really focusing on everything that I can see and what I can't see in the therapeutic session.

[End of Video]

6. Conclusion

6.1 Section 6: Wrapping Up

This course provides the foundational knowledge, values, and skills central to adoption competence. But it does not prepare you for every challenge. Enrolling in this course is a positive step. As with any training, you will need to continue to expand your expertise through continuing education and supervision.

6.2 Learning Journal

At the end of each lesson, you will have an opportunity to reflect on each lesson. This journal is for your own use and will not be scored or recorded anywhere in the training. It may be a good idea to print out and compile your responses to keep as a learning journal for reference when working with families.

Click the bottom right corner of the notebook to open it.

6.3 Journal Reflection

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

6.4 Journal Response

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

6.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed Course Overview and the Need for Adoption Competence.

The next lesson will focus on the importance of using the language of adoption.