

# Child Welfare Leadership and Adoption Competence

**Strengthening workforce capacity and achieving  
excellence in safety, permanency, and well-being.**



Child welfare leaders today are navigating unprecedented complexity. Across systems, agencies are facing overburdened staff, workforce shortages, and increasing numbers of children with unmet behavioral health needs. Despite the challenges, leaders are expected to improve outcomes in safety, permanency, and well-being, often while relying on systems and services they do not directly control. These challenges are not a reflection of effort. They reflect system gaps. When children and families do not receive timely, specialized support, we see placement instability, service fragmentation, and missed opportunities for long-term healing.

The [National Center for Adoption Competent Mental Health Services](#) is a Children’s Bureau (CB)-funded organization that is working to improve outcomes for children and families impacted by child welfare. We offer no-cost, [technical assistance](#) and access to practical resources via our [Knowledge Hub](#) to help you address these challenges directly by equipping your workforce and system with the tools needed to achieve excellence in safety, permanency, and well-being. With 25+ years of leadership from the [Center for Adoption Support and Education \(C.A.S.E.\)](#) and implementation of the [National Training Initiative \(NTI\)](#) across multiple states, the National Center is a trusted partner in strengthening child welfare systems.



## What is Adoption Competency?

An adoption competent professional and/or child-serving system has the knowledge and skills to provide services that are responsive to the unique needs of children and families who navigate the child welfare system. Adoption (or permanency) competence means your workforce and system are equipped with the knowledge and skills to respond to the unique needs of children and families impacted by foster care, adoption, and kinship care. Permanency means more than placement. It means helping children and families:

- **Build secure attachments**
- **Maintain meaningful connections**
- **Navigate identity, loss, and transitions over time**

Children who experience separation and loss often carry complex needs related to grief, identity, and relationships. Adoption competent systems ensure these needs are understood, addressed, and integrated into service delivery rather than treated as a secondary concern.

## Why Adoption Competency Matters for Child Welfare Leaders

Adoption competent professionals are trained to understand children’s behaviors in the context of their relationships and experiences within the child welfare system. When your workforce is adoption competent, your system is better equipped to deliver on its core mission. It provides the tools to:

- **Interpret behavior** through a trauma-, attachment-, and permanency-informed lens
- **Align mental health services** with child welfare goals
- **Support caregivers** with practical, relationship-based strategies
- **Strengthen cross-system collaboration** with behavioral health, education, and courts
- **Equip staff with the skills and confidence** needed to manage complex cases

As a result, systems can:

- **Reduce placement disruptions** and prevent re-entry into care
- **Increase placement stability** and strengthen caregiver capacity
- **Close gaps** between available services and family needs
- **Advance outcomes** beyond safety to long-term well-being
- **Improve workforce retention** by reducing burnout and increasing effectiveness

Children and families do not need less support after permanency. They need more targeted, developmentally and relationally informed care. Adoption competence ensures your system can deliver it.

## How the National Center Supports Your System

The National Center approaches partnership with child welfare leadership teams from a relationship-focused perspective. We partner with child welfare leaders to build sustainable, adoption competent systems that align with their priorities and values. Through this partnership, you will gain:

- **No-cost Technical Assistance (TA)** tailored to support leadership teams to address system challenges and drive change
- **Access to workforce and development training** such as [National Training Initiative \(NTI\) learning communities](#), [Training for Adoption Competency \(TAC\)](#), and ongoing [professional development](#)
- **Cross-system collaboration support** that provides tools and strategies to strengthen partnerships across mental health, education, and legal systems.
- **Lived experience integration** and other best practices for engaging youth and families as partners in system design

Adoption competence is not an add-on service. It is a necessary system adaptation. By partnering with the National Center, you will gain a trusted partner who understands the intersection of policy, practice, and lived experience, helping systems move beyond placement to achieve long-term family stability and success.



### Take the Next Step

Ready to strengthen your practice and better support the families you will serve?

- ▶ Enroll in [NTI](#)
- ▶ Contact [Mary Wichansky](#) to implement adoption competence broadly (in your class, cohort, program)
- ▶ Visit our website to learn more about the National Center, training, and resources: [bridges4mentalhealth.org](https://bridges4mentalhealth.org)

***You’re Leading in a System Under Pressure. You Don’t Have to Do It Alone***