

Finding a Therapist Who Gets You:

A Conversation Guide



pg. 1

**Biological Parents
with Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience**

pg. 3

**Biological Parents
with Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience
(MEDICAID)**

pg. 34

An Overview of Adoption Competence for Youth and Families



pg. 6

**Parents & Caregivers
with Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience**

pg. 13

**Parents & Caregivers
with Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience
(MEDICAID)**



pg. 20

**Young Adults with
Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience**

pg. 27

**Young Adults with
Child Welfare and
Adoption Experience
(MEDICAID)**

Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Biological Parents with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience

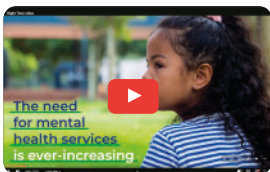


Why You Should Consider a Therapist with Specialized Training in Adoption Competence

As a parent, you hold a vital role in your child's life. Your love, guidance, protective care, and unwavering presence are essential. Your ability to advocate for and ensure they get what they need is critical.

This guide is designed to support you as you work with therapists and other professionals who are part of your child's care.

Working with an adoption competent, trained therapist (through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) can make a meaningful difference. Adoption competent clinicians combine trauma-informed care with specialized training that addresses the unique complexities connected to kinship care, foster care, guardianship, and adoption. They understand how loss, identity, attachment, and past instability affect a child's emotions, behavior, and relationships. With this support, children can build stronger connections, develop healthier coping skills, and feel more grounded, while parents gain practical tools to strengthen relationships and support long-term healing.



▶ [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

▶ [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

Interviewing and Assessing Your Therapist

Engaging with a therapist is a special relationship built on trust, being heard, and connection. Your input is important to understand how your therapist can help you and your child(ren). Open communication about your expectations, goals, and concerns builds trust and makes therapy more effective. We aim to help you feel informed, respected, and confident as you work toward healing and stability.

Use the worksheet on the following pages to explore the questions provided. These prompts are intended to support reflection for individuals of all backgrounds and experiences.

After Meeting with a Therapist

After interviewing a therapist, it can be helpful to reflect upon the conversation and determine if this therapist is the right fit for you. It's totally okay, and often really helpful, to meet with more than one therapist before choosing someone. You can also check in with trusted people in your life, like friends, family, or mentors, to hear their perspective.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they've worked with people who have experiences like mine?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel calmer or more grounded during or after the conversation?

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy is not just for crises; it helps you build coping skills, process emotions, and understand yourself. You deserve someone who respects your story and supports your healing. If needed, share information about [NTI](#) with your therapist. To find therapists with adoption competency training, visit the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).

Interviewing and Assessing Your Therapist

The following questions are useful for anyone, regardless of background. Choose those that best fit your situation:

Have you received adoption competency training (NTI or TAC)? If not, what kind of trauma- or child-welfare-related training do you have?

In what ways do you involve biological parents in the therapeutic process, even if the child is currently living outside the home?

What training do you have related to foster care, family separation, and reunification?

How do you help children and parents maintain connection & emotional safety during separation?

What experience do you have working with biological parents whose children are currently (or were previously) in foster care, adopted, or involved in the child welfare system?

How can you work with me to support reunification and help me navigate what comes next with my child?

Based on your experience, what kinds of issues or themes do biological parents of child-welfare-involved children often bring into therapy?

What is your approach to helping me parent a child with significant behavioral issues?



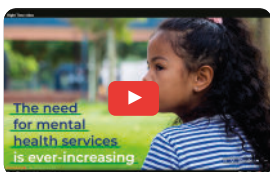
Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Biological Parents with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience (Medicaid)



Why You Should Advocate for Your Therapist to Receive Specialized Training in Adoption Competence

This guide is designed to support you as you work with therapists and other professionals who are part of your child's care. As a parent, you hold a vital role in your child's life. Your love, guidance, protective care, and unwavering presence are essential. Your ability to advocate for and ensure they get what they need is critical.

Working with an adoption competent, trained therapist (through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) can make a meaningful difference. Adoption competent clinicians combine trauma-informed care with specialized training that addresses the unique complexities connected to kinship care, foster care, guardianship, and adoption. They understand how loss, identity, attachment, and past instability affect a child's emotions, behavior, and relationships. With this support, children can build stronger connections, develop healthier coping skills, and feel more grounded, while parents gain practical tools to strengthen relationships and support long-term healing.



▶ [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

▶ [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

What If My Therapist Is Not NTI or TAC Trained?

You can let your therapist know about NTI and TAC and encourage them to check it out by sharing this link: <https://adoptionsupport.org/case-training-institute/nti/>.

If your therapist is not currently trained in NTI or TAC, you can encourage them to learn more about these programs. Let them know that the training is free, offers Continuing Education credits, and provides a professional certificate of completion that they can add to their credentials. Informing your therapist about this opportunity demonstrates self-advocacy in your own healing journey and supports their growth in providing even more effective care.

After Meeting with a Therapist

After interviewing a therapist, it can be helpful to reflect upon the conversation and determine if this therapist is the right fit for you. It's totally okay, and often really helpful, to meet with more than one therapist before choosing someone. You can also check in with trusted people in your life, like friends, family, or mentors, to hear their perspective.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they've worked with people who have experiences like mine?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel calmer or more grounded during or after the conversation?

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy is not just for crises; it helps you build coping skills, process emotions, and understand yourself. You deserve someone who respects your story and supports your healing. If needed, share information about [NTI](#) with your therapist. To find therapists with adoption competency training, visit the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).

Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Families seek therapy for various reasons—whether by choice, referral, or requirement. Your input is important; feel free to ask questions and understand how your therapist can help you and your child(ren). Open communication about your expectations, goals, and concerns builds trust and makes therapy more effective. We aim to help you feel informed, respected, and confident as you work toward healing and stability.

The following questions are useful for anyone, regardless of their background. Choose those that best fit your situation.

What training do you have related to adoption, child welfare, trauma, and foster care? Have you completed adoption competency training (NTI or TAC)? If not, are you open to additional training to better support my healing?

How familiar are you with concepts like ambiguous loss, grief, ongoing separation, and disrupted attachment, and how they affect both parents and children?

What experience do you have working with biological parents whose children are currently or were previously involved in foster care, adoption, or the child welfare system?

How do you support parents who are experiencing grief, anger, fear, guilt, or shame related to having a child in care?

Based on your experience, what issues or themes do biological parents involved in child welfare most often bring into therapy?

How do you help parents strengthen emotional regulation, coping skills, and overall well-being during this process?

Continued on next page >



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist (cont.)

How do you help children and parents maintain connection & emotional safety during separation?

How do you address disrupted attachment while honoring my child's relationships with my family and me?

How do you support communication with foster parents about progress, concerns, or goals while respecting privacy and court requirements?

How would you support me in working toward reunification or navigating uncertainty about next steps with my child?

How would you help me handle child welfare timelines or requirements when they feel overwhelming or unrealistic?

What is your approach to helping me parent a child with significant behavioral needs, especially in the context of trauma and separation?

How do you work with hope and uncertainty at the same time?

What does success in therapy look like to you for a biological parent in my situation?



Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Parents & Caregivers with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience

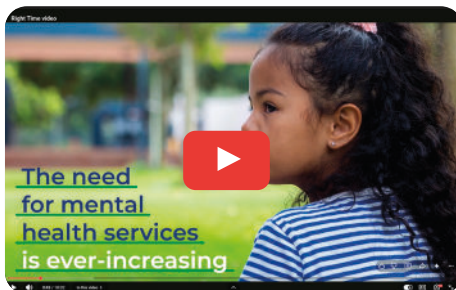


Why You Should Consider Therapy with an Adoption Competent Trained Therapist

Children and youth who have spent time in foster care often carry experiences of grief, loss, confusion, and overwhelming emotions—feelings that can surface long after the events themselves. Whether their time in the child welfare system was brief or long term, or they reached permanency through adoption, guardianship, or kinship care, it is common for them to struggle with trust, safety, identity, or relationships. These reactions are not signs that something is “wrong”; they are understandable responses to trauma and disruption, even in a loving and stable home.

Working with an adoption competent, trained therapist (through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) can make a meaningful difference. Adoption competent clinicians combine trauma-informed care with specialized training that addresses the unique complexities connected to kinship care, foster care, guardianship, and adoption. They understand how loss, identity, attachment, and past instability affect a child’s emotions, behavior, and relationships. With this support, children can build stronger connections, develop healthier coping skills, and feel more grounded, while parents gain practical tools to strengthen relationships and support long-term healing.

The Right Time. The Right Support. The Right Way.



► [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

► [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

Tips to Help Your Child Engage in Therapy

Adoption competent therapists take a whole-family approach, meaning they involve the entire family in the child’s healing. At the same time, they create a safe and confidential space where your child can share openly with a neutral adult. This privacy helps your child build trust. It also means the therapist will not repeat everything said in sessions but will use what they learn to guide meaningful conversations and support healing across your family.

Partnering with a therapist can be an important part of your child’s healing. Children often feel more comfortable when they have some choice and voice in the process, including having input about their connection with the therapist. If your child feels resistant, here are some ways to support them.

- Give your child some control: Offer choices when possible, such as what to talk about first, whether they want you in the room for part of the session, or what coping tools they want to try.
- Connect therapy to your child’s goals: Help them see how therapy can support things they care about, like feeling calmer, getting along better with friends, or having fewer worries.
- Reassure your child about safety and privacy: Let them know the therapist’s job is to support them, not judge them.

Interviewing and Assessing Your Therapist

When you're looking for a therapist, it helps to reach out and ask a few simple questions to see if they're a good fit for your family. You can briefly share what your child needs support with and ask about their experience, what sessions are like, and whether they understand foster care, adoption, or child welfare-related experiences. Meeting a therapist online or in person can help you notice if you feel safe, understood, and comfortable.

A big part of interviewing a therapist is making sure they truly understand the complex layers that come with adoption and child welfare. This includes knowing how attachment, loss and grief, identity, and past instability can shape a child's emotions and behavior. Asking about their training and therapeutic approaches can help you see whether they have the skills your child needs. Finding the right therapist means choosing someone who can genuinely support your child and your family's healing.

Use the worksheets on the following pages to explore questions to consider when choosing a therapist

After Meeting with a Therapist

After talking with a potential therapist, it can be helpful to pause and reflect on a few key questions. Notice how the conversation felt for you and how their responses landed with your lived experience. It is helpful to meet with more than one therapist before choosing someone. You can also check in with trusted people in your life, like friends, family, or mentors, to hear their perspective.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they've worked with people who have child welfare experiences like mine?
- Did the therapist make me feel confident that they have the experience and skills to understand my story?
- Did they show that they know how to work with someone who has a background like mine?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel calmer or more grounded during or after the conversation?

Use of the term "adoption competency" arises from the fact that the body of knowledge established to date has been rooted historically in research and practice with adoptive families. That research and insights from practice over more than two decades have revealed the presence and psychological impacts of "core issues" (i.e., loss and grief, guilt and shame, rejection, identity, intimacy, and mastery/control) and made clear that family formation that differs from formation by birth within a nuclear family brings with it normative challenges that can influence identity, family relationships, and psychological adjustment.

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy isn't only for emergencies—it can be a consistent space to build coping skills, process emotions, and better understand yourself. Even if you did not choose your therapist, you deserve someone who respects your story and supports your growth. If helpful, you can share information about the [NTI](#) with your therapist. To find therapists with adoption competency training, visit the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

How to use the guided questions section.

The general questions are helpful for anyone to ask, no matter their background. The experience-specific questions below are more connected to life in the child welfare system. Some may fit your family or child's story, and some may not. You can choose the ones that feel right for your experience!

General Questions:

What experience do you have working with children, teens, and families involved in the child welfare system and adoption?

How would you help me in working with my child or teenager who does not want to engage in therapy, or who is unwilling to disclose or discuss their trauma?

Have you received adoption competency training? If not, what kind of trauma/child-welfare training do you have?

How would you help me in supporting my child's interest in learning about their biological family, whether my child wants basic information, a broader search, to pursue a reunion, or any combination of these?

How do you view foster care and adoption, and how does that shape your work with families?

In your work supporting parents whose children have experienced child welfare, how would you help me help my child process the emotional impact of missing or incomplete parts of their own personal history, particularly ambiguous loss and the grief tied to losing family stories and a sense of relational belonging?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Older Teen Permanency/Adoption:

How would you help my teen build confidence in choosing supportive people and setting healthy boundaries?

How would you partner with my teen and with me to help them work toward goals like life skills, independence, and emotional well-being, at a pace that feels right for them?

How do you honor a teen's past relationships, families of origin, and lived experiences while also supporting their current family connections?

Our teen may not easily trust adults. How do you build trust and safety with teens who have experienced broken relationships or trauma?

What experience do you have supporting teens as they navigate big transitions (like adulthood, independence, education, or relationships) after foster care or adoption?

What does your approach look like when a teen's behavior is rooted in trauma, grief, or loss rather than typical "teen behavior " or could mimic a disorder when it is truly trauma-related behavior?

How can you help me support my teens who grew up in foster care or were adopted at an older age, especially those who had to become independent early?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Permanency Through Kinship or Guardianship Caregiver:

How can you support me as a kinship caregiver who is navigating complex family dynamics, like shifting roles or disagreements within the family?

What experience do you have supporting kinship families who may be managing grief, mixed feelings, or ongoing uncertainty about their role?

How do you manage feelings of guilt or role confusion for me as a kinship/guardianship caregiver? I often feel competing loyalty to my child and my child's biological parent(s)?

How would you include our whole family in your work, especially when children are coping with past trauma, loyalty concerns, or confusion about where they belong?

How can you help my family set healthy boundaries with my child's parents while still honoring important relationships and connections as I play a parent role for my grandchildren and for my child's parent?

Have you worked with children whose relatives or guardians raised them? How do you support children and families with this kind of background?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Adoption:

Are you familiar with the 7 Core Issues of Adoption? If not, are you comfortable exploring them with me?

I have been struggling with the “being grateful” narratives directed at me as an adoptive parent and for my adopted child. How can you help me process these feelings?

Sometimes people make comments to adoptive parents and adopted children, like saying they’re ‘lucky,’ that they should feel grateful, or treating adoptive parents as ‘saviors.’ How do you approach these kinds of messages when they come up for my children and me, and how do you help us navigate them healthily?

Our family truly feels lucky to have found each other, even though our relationship began after painful breaks in early attachment. Sometimes that brings up complicated feelings like guilt or wondering whether it’s okay to feel both joy and grief at the same time. How can you help me, my child, and family make sense of comments about being ‘lucky’ or ‘grateful,’ while also honoring the real losses and mixed emotions that come with adoption?

How do you help me support my child in understanding and navigating their identity and any experiences they may have within our diverse family?

How do you support my child’s autonomy in sessions while also helping us build healthier communication and healing as a family?

Continued on next page >



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist (cont.)

Adoption:

How do you ensure that my intentions or feelings as a parent don't unintentionally overshadow my child's experience in foster care and adoption?

What therapeutic approaches do you use, and how do they address adoption-related needs and trauma?

How do you help me support my child in expressing their feelings about adoption in a way that honors their experience rather than minimizing or pathologizing it?



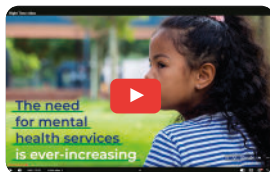
Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Parents & Caregivers with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience (Medicaid)



Why You Should Advocate for Your Therapist to Receive Specialized Training in Adoption Competence

Children and youth who have spent time in foster care often carry experiences of grief, loss, confusion, and overwhelming emotions—feelings that can surface long after the events themselves. Whether their time in the child welfare system was brief or long term, or they reached permanency through adoption, guardianship, or kinship care, it is common for them to struggle with trust, safety, identity, or relationships. These reactions are not signs that something is “wrong”; they are understandable responses to trauma and disruption, even in a loving and stable home.

Working with an adoption competent, trained therapist (through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) can make a meaningful difference. Adoption competent clinicians combine trauma-informed care with specialized training that addresses the unique complexities connected to kinship care, foster care, guardianship, and adoption. They understand how loss, identity, attachment, and past instability affect a child’s emotions, behavior, and relationships. With this support, children can build stronger connections, develop healthier coping skills, and feel more grounded, while parents gain practical tools to strengthen relationships and support long-term healing.



► [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

► [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

After Meeting with a Therapist

After talking with a therapist, it can be helpful to pause and reflect on the conversation to determine whether this person is the right fit for you and your family. It is helpful to meet with more than one therapist before making a decision. You can also check in with trusted people in your life, such as friends, family members, or mentors, to get their thoughts and support as you make your decision.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they’ve worked with people who have child welfare experiences like mine?
- Did the therapist make me feel confident that they have the experience and skills to understand my story?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel more grounded or calmer during or after the conversation?

What If My Family’s Therapist Is not NTI or TAC Trained?

When you feel ready, you can let your therapist know about NTI and TAC and encourage them to check it out by sharing this link: <https://adoptionsupport.org/case-training-institute/nti/>.

The NTI training is free, offers Continuing Education credits therapists can use towards their clinical license, and provides a professional certificate of completion that they can add to their credentials. Asking your therapist about these training courses is important in your own and your child(ren)’s healing and can help them grow their skills to better support your family.

Tips to Help Your Child Engage in Therapy

Adoption competent therapists take a whole-family approach, meaning they involve the entire family in the child's healing. At the same time, they create a safe and confidential space where your child can share openly with a neutral adult. This privacy helps your child build trust. It also means the therapist will not repeat everything said in sessions but will use what they learn to guide meaningful conversations and support healing across your family.

Partnering with a therapist can be an important part of your child's healing. Children often feel more comfortable when they have some choice and voice in the process, including having input about their connection with the therapist. If your child feels resistant, below are some ways to support them.

Resistance is not a sign of failure. It's often a protective response—your child trying to stay safe in the only way they know how. With patience, choice, and support, most children and teens become more comfortable over time.

- **Offer choices/acknowledge older youth's autonomy:** Let your child decide small things, like what to talk about or whether you stay in the room.
- **Connect therapy to their goals:** Explain how therapy can help with things they care about, like feeling calmer or having fewer worries.
- **Reassure them:** Let them know therapy is a safe, supportive space, not a place to be judged.
- **Normalize feelings and concerns:** Remind them it's normal to feel unsure at first. If they say therapy is awkward or pointless, respond with curiosity rather than correction.
- **Encourage feedback/input:** Invite them to share what feels helpful or uncomfortable so the therapist can adjust.
- **Use simple, reassuring words (especially for young children):** "This is a helper whose job is to make things feel easier for you."
- **Use play to prepare:** Draw pictures, use dolls, or play out what a therapy visit might be like.
- **Keep a routine:** Explain what will happen before and after therapy so they know what to expect.
- **Celebrate effort:** Praise their courage for trying—even if it felt hard or didn't last long.
- **Be honest and transparent based on what's age appropriate:** Children/youth appreciate clarity about privacy, what the therapist's role is, and what information stays confidential.
- **Avoid pressure or lectures:** Instead of "You need therapy," try: "I think this could help you feel better. What would make it easier to try?"

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy isn't only for emergencies—it can be a consistent space to build coping skills, process emotions, and better understand yourself. Even if you did not choose your therapist, you deserve someone who respects your story and supports your growth. If helpful, you can share information about t [NTI](#) with your therapist. To find therapists with adoption competency training, visit the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).

Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Families come to therapy for many reasons. Some parents and caregivers choose therapy on their own, while others are referred or required by the court or another system. However you and your family arrived, your voice matters. We hope to support you in feeling informed, respected, and confident as you work alongside a therapist toward healing and stability for your family. Some tips to get you started in building a partnership with the therapist:

- Share what you notice at home—stressors, routines, triggers, strengths.
- Ask how you can reinforce skills or coping tools between sessions.
- Check in with your child about what feels helpful or uncomfortable.
- Encourage open communication between you, your child, and the therapist.

Use the worksheets on the following pages to help start the conversation with your therapist.



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

The questions below are helpful for anyone to ask, no matter your background.

Some may fit your story, and some may not — you can choose the ones that feel right for your experience.

General Questions:

What experience do you have working with children, teens, and families involved in the child welfare system and adoption?

How would you help me in working with my child or teenager who does not want to engage in therapy, or who is unwilling to disclose or discuss their trauma?

Have you received adoption competency training? If not, what kind of trauma/child-welfare training do you have?

How would you help me in supporting my child's interest in learning about their biological family, whether my child wants basic information, a broader search, to pursue a reunion, or any combination of these?

How do you view foster care and adoption, and how does that shape your work with families?

In your work supporting parents whose children have experienced child welfare, how would you help me help my child process the emotional impact of missing or incomplete parts of their own personal history, particularly ambiguous loss and the grief tied to losing family stories and a sense of relational belonging?

How do you include parents or caregivers in the therapeutic process?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Older Teen Permanency/Adoption:

How would you help my teen build confidence in choosing supportive people and setting healthy boundaries?

How would you partner with my teen and with me to help them work toward goals like life skills, independence, and emotional well-being, at a pace that feels right for them?

How do you honor a teen's past relationships, families of origin, and lived experiences while also supporting their current family connections?

Our teen may not easily trust adults. How do you build trust and safety with teens who have experienced broken relationships or trauma?

What experience do you have supporting teens as they navigate big transitions (like adulthood, independence, education, or relationships) after foster care or adoption?

What does your approach look like when a teen's behavior is rooted in trauma, grief, or loss rather than typical "teen behavior " or could mimic a disorder when it is truly trauma-related behavior?

How can you help me support my teens who grew up in foster care or were adopted at an older age, especially those who had to become independent early?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Permanency Through Kinship or Guardianship Caregiver:

How can you support me as a kinship caregiver who is navigating complex family dynamics, like shifting roles or disagreements within the family?

What experience do you have supporting kinship families who may be managing grief, mixed feelings, or ongoing uncertainty about their role?

How do you manage feelings of guilt or role confusion for me as a kinship/guardianship caregiver? I often feel competing loyalty to my child and my child's biological parent(s)?

How would you include our whole family in your work, especially when children are coping with past trauma, loyalty concerns, or confusion about where they belong?

How can you help my family set healthy boundaries with my child's parents while still honoring important relationships and connections as I play a parent role for my grandchildren and for my child's parent?

Have you worked with children whose relatives or guardians raised them? How do you support children and families with this kind of background?



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist

Adoption:

Are you familiar with the 7 Core Issues of Adoption? If not, are you comfortable exploring them with me?

I have been struggling with the “being grateful” narratives directed at me as an adoptive parent and for my adopted child. How can you help me process these feelings?

Sometimes people make comments to adoptive parents and adopted children, like saying they’re ‘lucky,’ that they should feel grateful, or treating adoptive parents as ‘saviors.’ How do you approach these kinds of messages when they come up for my children and me, and how do you help us navigate them healthily?

Our family truly feels lucky to have found each other, even though our relationship began after painful breaks in early attachment. Sometimes that brings up complicated feelings like guilt or wondering whether it’s okay to feel both joy and grief at the same time. How can you help me, my child, and family make sense of comments about being ‘lucky’ or ‘grateful,’ while also honoring the real losses and mixed emotions that come with adoption?

How do you help me support my child in understanding and navigating their identity and any experiences they may have within our diverse family?

How do you support my child’s autonomy in sessions while also helping us build healthier communication and healing as a family?

Continued on next page >



Questions to Consider When Choosing a Therapist (cont.)

Adoption:

How do you ensure that my intentions or feelings as a parent don't unintentionally overshadow my child's experience in foster care and adoption?

What therapeutic approaches do you use, and how do they address adoption-related needs and trauma?

How do you help me support my child in expressing their feelings about adoption in a way that honors their experience rather than minimizing or pathologizing it?



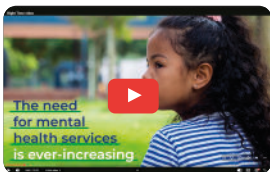
Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Young Adults with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience



Why You Should Consider a Therapist with Specialized Training in Adoption Competence

Whether you are still in care, have spent time in foster care, reached permanency through adoption or guardianship, or reunited with your biological family, your experiences may stay with you long after the moment has passed. You might feel grief and loss, have questions about why you came into care and surrounding your identity, or find it hard to trust people. Those feelings and reactions are understandable responses to what you have lived through, not signs that something is wrong with you.

Many therapists understand trauma, but do not understand all the other experiences you have had. Adoption competent trained (either through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) therapists have specific training. They understand the impact of disrupted attachments, losses of birth family, and so many other losses that happen when you come into care. They understand how identity struggles, relationships, and life transitions can shape your thoughts, feelings and emotions. They see the whole picture, not just your symptoms, but what is underneath. They recognize that some of your reactions come from trauma, not from who you are as a person.



▶ [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

▶ [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

Interviewing and Assessing Your Therapist

Finding a therapist is a special relationship built on trust, connection, and the confidence that the therapist can help with what you are seeking support for. We want to empower you so you feel you have the tools you need to find the right therapist for you.

Use the worksheet on the following pages to explore the questions provided. These prompts are intended to support reflection for individuals of all backgrounds and experiences.

After Meeting with a Therapist

After interviewing a therapist, it can be helpful to reflect upon the conversation and determine if this therapist is the right fit for you. It's totally okay, and often really helpful, to meet with more than one therapist before choosing someone. You can also check in with trusted people in your life, like friends, family, or mentors, to hear their perspective.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they had worked with others like you who have child welfare experiences?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel calmer or more grounded during or after the conversation?

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy is not only for emergencies—it can be a consistent space to build coping skills, process emotions, and better understand yourself. Even if you did not choose your therapist, you deserve someone who respects your story and supports your growth. If helpful, you can share information about [NTI](#) with your therapist. To find therapists with adoption competency training, visit the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).

Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

The questions below can be helpful as you look for your support person, no matter your background. Some may fit your story, and some may not — you can choose the ones that feel right for your experience.

General Questions:

Have you received adoption competency training (NTI or TAC)? If not, what trauma, child welfare, or adoption-related training do you have? Would you be open to additional training to better support me?

What experience do you have working with individuals who have been in foster care, adopted, reunified, or found permanency through kinship or guardianship?

How familiar are you with concepts like ambiguous loss and the 7 Core Issues of foster care and adoption?

What therapeutic approaches do you use, and how do they fit child welfare and adoption-related needs?



Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

Understanding & Approach:

In your work with young adults who have lived experience in child welfare, what themes or challenges tend to come up?

How do you support young adults in processing grief related to missing or incomplete parts of their personal history or family story?

How do you help young adults understand and honor their background, especially when it differs from that of their caregivers or peers?

How do you support young adults who feel caught between identities or unsure where they belong?

How do you help clients build confidence in their own voice and story?

How do you support young adults experiencing grief, anger, fear, guilt, or shame related to their experiences?

How do you ensure therapy feels safe and not retraumatizing?

How do you tailor therapy to what I need, rather than making assumptions?



Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

Relationship & Connection:

How do you help young adults work through relationship challenges, including fear of rejection, loss, or trust issues?

If I want to include members of my family (biological, foster, or adoptive) in therapy, would you support that?

How do you support building healthy relationships, boundaries, and confidence in choosing supportive people?

How do you approach communication between different caregivers or family members when needed?

How do you help navigate complicated relationships with biological, adoptive, or foster family members?



Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

Identity, Healing & Growth:

How do you help young adults explore identity and build a sense of self, especially after foster care, adoption, or family changes?

How do you help young adults work through mixed emotions (e.g., gratitude, grief, guilt) at the same time? Would you support that?

How do you support emotional regulation, healing, and overall well-being?

How do you help young adults navigate harmful messages (e.g., being told to feel “lucky” or “grateful”)?

How do you help clients move forward at a pace that feels right for them?



Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

Aging Out of Foster Care:

How will you support me in building life skills, independence, and strong relationships?

How would you partner with me to reach my goals at a pace that works for me?

How do you help young adults manage overwhelm related to expectations, transitions, or uncertainty about the future?

Permanency through Kinship or Guardianship:

If you have worked with young adults raised by relatives or guardians, what common themes have you seen?

How do you help young adults make sense of kinship or guardianship experiences while building confidence in who they are?

How do you approach shifting family roles, expectations, or past instability?



Questions To Consider When Choosing a Therapist:

Adoption:

What adoption-related issues have you supported adoptees with?

How do you help adoptees navigate guilt, loyalty conflicts, or pressure to “be okay”?

How do you balance acknowledging adoptive parents’ intentions while centering the adoptees lived experience?

How would you support me if I want to explore information about or reconnect with my biological family (background, search, or reunion)?

How do you create space for me to share openly without feeling judged or minimized?



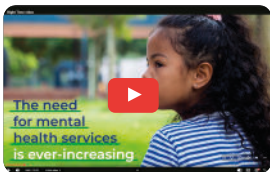
Finding a Therapist Who Gets You: A Conversation Guide for Young Adults with Child Welfare and Adoption Experience (Medicaid)



Why You Should Advocate for Your Therapist to Receive Specialized Training in Adoption Competence

Whether you are still in care, have spent time in foster care, reached permanency through adoption or guardianship, or reunited with your biological family, your experiences may stay with you long after the moment has passed. You might feel grief and loss, have questions about why you came into care and surrounding your identity, or find it hard to trust people. Those feelings and reactions are understandable responses to what you have lived through, not signs that something is wrong with you.

Many therapists understand trauma, but do not understand all the other experiences you have had. Adoption competent trained (either through the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \[NTI\]](#) or the [Training for Adoption Competency \[TAC\]](#)) therapists have specific training that does. They understand the impact of disrupted attachments, losses of birth family, and so many other losses that happen when you come into care. They understand how identity struggles, relationships, and life transitions can shape your thoughts, feelings, and emotions. They see the whole picture, not just your symptoms, but what is underneath. They recognize that some of your reactions come from trauma.



▶ [Click here to watch the video to learn more about adoption competency.](#)

▶ [You can also review the Adoption Competence Overview for additional details.](#)

What If My Therapist Is Not NTI or TAC Trained?

When you feel ready, you can let your therapist know about NTI and TAC and encourage them to check it out by sharing this link: <https://adoptionssupport.org/case-training-institute/nti/>.

The NTI training is free, offers Continuing Education credits therapists can use towards their clinical license, and provides a professional certificate of completion that they can add to their credentials. Asking your therapist about these training courses is important in your own healing and can help them grow their skills to better support you.

After Meeting with a Therapist

Even if you could not choose your therapist because of insurance or Medicaid limitations, your experience still matters. After a few sessions, ask yourself whether you feel supported and understood. If not, you can request a different therapist or share feedback about what you need. Talking with a trusted friend, family member, or mentor can also help as you consider next steps. You can also share our [Knowledge Hub](#) with your therapist, which includes research, trends, and lived-experience blogs from the adoption and foster care community.

- Did the therapist make me feel genuinely understood, and did it seem like they have worked with people who have child welfare experiences like mine?
- Did they show real understanding of experiences like mine, not just general trauma-informed practices and skills?
- Did I notice any moments where I felt seen, supported, or understood without having to spell everything out?
- Did my body feel calmer or more grounded during or after the conversation?

You Deserve Good Support

Therapy is not just for emergencies. It can help you build coping skills, process emotions, and better understand yourself. Even if you did not choose your therapist, you deserve support from someone who respects your story. You can also share [NTI](#) resources with your therapist or explore the [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#).

Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

People come to therapy for many different reasons. You may have sought therapy on your own, been court-ordered to attend, or started at the encouragement of a parent, caregiver, or loved one. Regardless of how you arrived here, you have the right to ask your therapist questions about how they can support your healing. These conversations can help clarify expectations, build collaboration, and shape how you envision working together.

The questions below are helpful for anyone to ask, no matter your background. Some may fit your story, and some may not — you can choose the ones that feel right for your experience.

General Questions:

Have you received adoption competency training (NTI or TAC)? If not, what trauma, child welfare, or adoption-related training do you have? Would you be open to additional training to better support me?

What experience do you have working with individuals who have been in foster care, adopted, reunified, or found permanency through kinship or guardianship?

How familiar are you with concepts like ambiguous loss and the 7 Core Issues of foster care and adoption?

What therapeutic approaches do you use, and how do they fit child welfare and adoption-related needs?



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Understanding & Approach:

In your work with young adults who have lived experience in child welfare, what themes or challenges tend to come up?

How do you support young adults in processing grief related to missing or incomplete parts of their personal history or family story?

How do you help young adults understand and honor their background, especially when it differs from that of their caregivers or peers?

How do you support young adults who feel caught between identities or unsure where they belong?

How do you help young adults build confidence in their own voice and story?

How do you support young adults experiencing grief, anger, fear, guilt, or shame related to their experiences?

How do you ensure therapy feels safe and not retraumatizing?

How do you tailor therapy to what I need, rather than making assumptions?



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Relationship & Connection:

How do you help individuals work through relationship challenges, including fear of rejection, loss, or trust issues?

If I want to include members of my family (biological, foster, or adoptive) in therapy, would you support that?

How do you support building healthy relationships, boundaries, and confidence in choosing supportive people?

How do you approach communication between different caregivers or family members when needed?

How do you help navigate complicated relationships with biological, adoptive, or foster family members?



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Identity, Healing & Growth:

How do you help young adults explore identity and build a sense of self, especially after foster care, adoption, or family changes?

How do you help young adults work through mixed emotions (e.g., gratitude, grief, guilt) at the same time? Would you support that?

How do you support emotional regulation, healing, and overall well-being?

How do you help young adults navigate harmful messages (e.g., being told to feel “lucky” or “grateful”)?

How do you help young adults move forward at a pace that feels right for them?



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Aging Out of Foster Care:

How will you support me in building life skills, independence, and strong relationships?

How would you partner with me to reach my goals at a pace that works for me?

How do you help young adults manage overwhelm related to expectations, transitions, or uncertainty about the future?

Permanency through Kinship or Guardianship:

If you have worked with young adults raised by relatives or guardians, what common themes have you seen?

How do you help young adults make sense of kinship or guardianship experiences while building confidence in who they are?

How do you approach shifting family roles, expectations, or past instability?



Conversation Starters With Your Therapist

Adoption:

What adoption-related issues have you supported adoptees with?

How do you help adoptees navigate guilt, loyalty conflicts, or pressure to “be okay”?

How do you balance acknowledging adoptive parents’ intentions while centering the adoptees lived experience?

How would you support me if I want to explore information about or reconnect with my biological family (background, search, or reunion)?

How do you create space for me to share openly without feeling judged or minimized?



An Overview of Adoption Competence for Youth and Families



What are adoption competent trainings, and how do they help therapists support people with child welfare experience?

Adoption competence is specialized mental health training that equips professionals and systems to understand and respond to the needs of children and families across all permanency journeys, including foster care, adoption, kinship care, and guardianship. It equips your mental health provider with the knowledge and skills to recognize how separation, loss, trauma, and major transitions shape a child's development and to offer family-centered, trauma-informed support that strengthens and fosters healing. Adoption competency training builds on foundational trauma work and provides therapists with the additional skills needed to truly support you. Below are links to learn more:



[NTI \(National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training\)](#) -NTI is a free online training that helps therapists better understand the mental health and developmental needs of children and youth in foster care, adoption, guardianship, or kinship families. NTI can strengthen therapeutic practice by improving a therapist's ability to support well-being and permanency for children and youth in foster, adoptive, and guardianship families.



[Training for Adoption Competency \(TAC\)](#) - Training for Adoption Competency (TAC) is the nation's premier assessment-based certificate program for training mental health practitioners and developing adoption competency skills. Through classroom and remote instruction, as well as clinical case consultation, TAC students master key clinical skills that support adopted children and their foster, adoptive, and kinship families. TAC has 20 training centers across the country, over 2,500 graduates (and growing), and received accreditation from the Institute for Credentialing Excellence (ICE), making it a recognized top-tier program dedicated to public protection and excellence in practice.

What is Adoption Competency?

Adoption competent therapists:

- Understand the whole story, not just the symptoms.
- Do not minimize or avoid child welfare-related topics.
- Recognize that healing happens in the context of relationships and your family is at the center for healing.
- Understand loyalty conflicts and identity questions.
- Recognize that grief and loss can resurface at different ages.
- Understand the importance of birth family connections.
- Support caregivers feel supported, not judged.

Understanding the Core Issues Behind Grief, Loss, and Healing

There are more than 200 core competencies that make up adoption competent knowledge and skills—everything from understanding trauma and identity to navigating complex family dynamics. Among all these competencies, there are seven core issues (Roszia and Maxon, 2019) that consistently show up for many families who have experienced foster care, adoption, guardianship, or kinship care. These seven issues are widely recognized because they reflect the real, lived experiences of loss, identity, belonging, and connection that many people in the child welfare system relate to.

These 7 core issues may or may not have shown up in your own life — everyone's story is different. This section is not meant to label you. Instead, it is here to help you think about your experiences, notice what resonates, and identify areas you might want to explore more with a therapist or simply reflect on for yourself. An adoption competent therapist helps you talk about these issues without judgment and reminds you that these emotions aren't weaknesses; they are valid responses to what you have lived through.

For example, grief is one of the most common core issues and can be especially complex for children and families involved in the child welfare system. Rather than grieving a single loss, children and parents may grieve many things over time—birth family connections, previous homes, routines, relationships, or a sense of what might have been. Grief and loss, along with attachment and identity, are often lifelong themes.

Healing doesn't happen all at once. It shows up in small, everyday moments: being listened to, feeling understood, and having someone consistently show up for you. Ordinary moments like shared meals, car rides, or bedtime routines can become powerful opportunities for connection and healing. A strengths-based family approach recognizes that behaviors often reflect underlying trauma, grief, or loss, not defiance. With support from an adoption competent therapist, youth and caregivers can learn to look beneath behaviors, strengthen relationships, and help their families move forward with patience, empathy, and care.

7 Core Issues of Foster Care & Adoption

1. LOSS:

Loss shapes the experiences of birth parents, youth, and caregivers in different but deeply connected ways. Separation can mean losing people, routines, culture, roles, or parts of your story. Some losses are unclear or unresolved, which can make them harder to grieve. This is called ambiguous loss.

2. REJECTION:

Rejection for caregivers is often experienced as emotional pain, confusion, and self-questioning, even when they deeply understand the underlying reasons behind a child's behavior. Fear of rejection may cause children and youth to withdraw or keep their guard up.

3. GUILT & SHAME:

Shame and guilt can deepen feelings of grief and may operate at a subconscious level. These emotions can negatively affect self-esteem, making it harder to maintain a positive self-image or to give and receive love. Members of the family network may experience this in different

ways, such as parents/caregivers feeling inadequate, youth feeling unworthy, or birth parents struggling with guilt over actions and/or decisions made.

4. GRIEF:

Grief is often ongoing and can resurface during major life moments. It may show up as sadness, anger, numbness, or withdrawal. Sometimes this grief is obvious, but other times it is layered, hidden, and not recognized. It can be expressed as anger, shutting down, pulling away, or other behaviors once a young person feels safe enough to express themselves. All of these forms of grief are real and valid. They are part of making sense of life experiences and finding ways to heal.

5. IDENTITY:

Experiences in foster care or adoption can affect how you see yourself, your role, and where you belong. You may experience identity-linked grief, which is the feeling of missing pieces of yourself, like your name, culture, or personal story, that shifted because of foster care

or adoption. These losses can shape how you see yourself and where you feel you belong.

6. INTIMACY:

Early loss and stress can make trust and closeness in relationships harder. Guardedness is often a protective response. Caregivers may also experience challenges with attachment and intimacy, especially when children struggle to connect or when placements are temporary.

7. CONTROL / MASTERY:

Children and youth, parents, and caregivers often experience a loss of control due to decisions made by systems, leading to feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. A desire for clarity, predictability, and agency is a normal response when power and choice have felt limited. Birth parents and caregivers may feel helpless or respond by becoming overly strict or protective as they navigate complex and uncertain roles.