

# The Legal System and Adoption Competence

**Strengthening decision-making, improving outcomes, and supporting long-term stability.**



Legal professionals today are navigating increasingly complex cases involving children and families impacted by child welfare, often within systems experiencing overburdened staff, service gaps, and youth with unmet behavioral health needs. These challenges can make it difficult to achieve timely permanency, ensure appropriate services, and support long-term stability. As a legal professional, your decisions influence long-term outcomes for children and families. For those affected by child welfare, these outcomes should be guided by an understanding of how trauma, loss, and grief influence behavior and development.

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 navigating the child welfare system. Adoption (or permanency) competence means you, the workforce, and systems 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 a legal outcome or 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 professionals and systems ensure that these needs are understood, addressed, and integrated into service delivery rather than treated as a secondary concern.

## Why Adoption Competency Matters for Legal Professionals

Adoption competent care strengthens your ability to make informed, effective decisions that support children and families over the long term.



- Understand the needs of children in the context of their experiences, relationships, and development
- Align legal decision-making with children's behavioral health, developmental, and permanency needs
- Issue more precise court orders that connect youth to appropriate services and levels of care
- Mandate care and treatment decisions that reflect the complexity of children's needs

As a result, you can:

- Support timely permanency decisions that promote stability and long-term well-being
- Reduce placement disruptions by aligning decisions with relational and developmental needs
- Strengthen outcomes in safety, permanency, and well-being
- Increase confidence that rulings support long-term stability rather than short-term compliance

Adoption competence helps ensure that legal decisions reflect the full context of a child's experiences, leading to more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes.

## How the National Center Supports Legal Professionals

The National Center provides practical, real-world support to help strengthen legal decision-making and system coordination. Through this partnership, you gain:

- Access to tools and resources that support informed decision-making and appropriate service referrals
- Access to workforce and development training such as [National Training Initiative \(NTI\) learning communities](#) and ongoing [professional development](#)
- Strategies to improve coordination across courts, child welfare, and mental health systems
- Support for addressing complex cases, service gaps, and system challenges

Adoption competent care promotes informed, fair, and future-oriented justice. The National Center acknowledges legal authority while supporting decisions that prioritize developmental needs and long-term well-being. Adoption competence is not an add-on. It is a necessary tool for effective legal practice.



## 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 Are Making Decisions That Shape Lives. You Do Not Have to Do It Alone.***