

Researchers and Adoption Competence

**Advancing knowledge, strengthening evidence,
and improving system outcomes.**



As a researcher, you play a critical role in shaping how systems understand and respond to the needs of children and families. At the same time, you may encounter gaps between research and practice, limited access to cross-system data, and challenges in translating findings into real-world impact. Children and families impacted by child welfare experience complex, intersecting challenges related to trauma, loss, identity, and relationships, but these experiences are not always fully captured in traditional research frameworks.

These challenges are not a reflection of research effort. They reflect gaps in how systems define, measure, and respond to need.

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. 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.

Evaluation findings from the [Training for Adoption Competency \(TAC\)](#) demonstrate that adoption competent training significantly improves provider knowledge, clinical confidence, and the ability to deliver developmentally and relationally informed care. Participating clinicians reported stronger therapeutic alliances and greater effectiveness in engaging families, while caregivers reported improved parenting strategies and better behavioral, emotional, and relational outcomes for their children. These findings provide empirical support for adoption competence as a measurable, teachable framework that strengthens both clinical practice and long-term permanency outcomes.

Implications for Research

Implications for research continue to evolve. Current findings represent an important foundation, but additional replication studies, larger sample sizes, and deeper analyses are needed to better understand outcomes across subpopulations and service contexts. Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs, randomized controlled studies where feasible, and expanded examination of treatment experiences, including child-reported outcomes and long-term permanency stability. Continued investigation into the relationship between specific adoption competent practices, intervention approaches, and family outcomes will further strengthen the evidence base and inform the next generation of effective, scalable models of care.

How the National Center Supports Researchers

The National Center connects research, practice, and lived experience to strengthen the impact of your work. Through this partnership, you gain:

- Access to **practice-informed research questions** and real-world applications
- Opportunities to **contribute to an underserved** and high-impact research area
- **Cross-system insights** spanning child welfare, behavioral health, education, and courts
- **Support for translating research into practical tools**, training, and system design

Adoption competence is not an add-on. It is a critical framework for advancing research that drives real-world impact.

Why Adoption Competency Matters to Researchers

Adoption competence is a specialized, interdisciplinary research framework that strengthens systems' understanding of and response to children and families impacted by child welfare.

It provides the tools to:

- **Examine how trauma, attachment disruption, loss, identity development, and permanency transitions influence outcomes**
- **Expand beyond general trauma frameworks** to include relational permanence and family system dynamics
- **Identify gaps in services**, interventions, and system responses
- **Study workforce readiness**, implementation strategies, and system transformation
- **Develop research** that is developmentally responsive, culturally grounded, and longitudinally informed

As a result, you can:

- **Generate more accurate**, relevant, and actionable findings
- **Strengthen the connection** between research, policy, and practice
- **Inform workforce development**, service delivery, and system design
- **Support improved outcomes** in safety, permanency, and well-being

Adoption competence is more than a clinical concept. It is a research domain that advances understanding of complex populations and supports meaningful, system-level change.



Take the Next Step

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

- ▶ Enroll in [NTI](#) or [TAC](#) training
- ▶ 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

**You're Generating Evidence to Improve Systems.
You Don't Have to Do It Alone.**