

Tribal Leadership and Adoption Competence

What is Adoption Competency?

Simply put, being adoption/permanency competent means a 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 experience the child welfare system. Permanency means more than placement. It means helping children and families build secure attachments, maintain healthy connections, and navigate challenges over time with understanding and compassion. Permanency thrives when systems and professionals work together to strengthen families through every stage.

Experiencing separation and loss and navigating a permanency journey impacts every part of a child's identity. The core issues (including loss, grief, rejection, guilt, shame, and identity) can surface at different stages of life for children and their families.

Permanency-competent professionals are trained to understand children's behaviors in the context of their relationships and experiences within the child welfare system. In their practice, these professionals respond empathetically to the underlying needs of children and families through family-centered, trauma-informed care. By building core competencies, practitioners can guide families toward understanding, resilience, and connection.

Why Adoption/ Permanency Competency Matters for Native Children and Families

Adoption /Permanency competence respects sovereignty, acknowledges historical trauma, and supports community-led practices. It aligns with Tribal values and is culturally responsive.

Adoption/Permanency competence supports Tribal communities by:

Integrating cultural identity, family connections, and community strengths into care

Respecting Tribal authority in defining healing and permanency

Supporting children and families without imposing non-Tribal frameworks



For Native children and families, healing must be defined and guided by Tribal values, cultural practices, and community priorities. Adoption competence empowers child welfare and mental health professionals working with Tribal Nations to facilitate healing and permanency through a culturally centered lens. The National Center recognizes that termination of parental rights and formal adoption is not often the preferred permanency option for children served by tribal child welfare systems. Instead, guardianship or customary adoption, often with relatives, is more frequently the choice to achieve permanency for children who are unable to return to their parents. Adoption competency applies across the child welfare continuum and supports kinship placements.

Why Work with the National Center

The National Center approaches partnership with Tribes from a sovereignty-honoring, relationship-focused perspective. It recognizes that adoption/permanency competence must be defined and aligned with Tribal values, cultural practices, and community priorities. The National Center provides tools to develop an adoption competent system, including:

Technical Assistance (TA) for leadership

National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI)

Training for Adoption Competency (TAC) for professionals

Ongoing professional development

Supervisor training and coaching



By working with the National Center, Tribes can:

Shape adoption/permanency competent approaches that reflect cultural identity and community strengths

Access support without sacrificing sovereignty or self-determination

Engage in a partnership that respects Tribal authority and lived experience



The National Center promotes Tribal-led approaches to mental health care. It collaborates with Tribes to highlight community-defined healing practices, support children and families, and support the Tribe's work to support their identity and culture.