

The Language of Adoption

1. Introduction and Objective

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back. In this lesson, the Language of Adoption, we will lay the foundation of adoption competent practice, starting with the language we use in our work with children, youth, and families.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objective

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:
Recognize the importance of using positive adoption language.

2. Positive Adoption Language

2.1 Positive Adoption Language

Becoming an adoption competent therapist not only entails a change in knowledge, skills, and values, but a change in the language you use, as well. It is important to embrace the value of sharing a language that promotes adoption sensitivity, clarifies misperceptions others may have, and honors the experiences of those impacted by adoption.

2.2 Language

Language is powerful. Language can be positive or negative, convey emotions, attitudes, values, thoughts, beliefs, or acceptance.

Click each post-it note to hear more.

Power of Language: Language can be interpreted differently by individuals. Adoption language is no different, and when we use positive adoption language we are affirming that building a family by adoption is as positive as building a family by birth.

Origin: The concept of positive adoption language was first introduced by Minneapolis social worker, Marietta Spencer, in the 1970's, recognizing that the language that was being used at the time was not supportive and positive of adoption, but painted a decidedly negative picture.

Positive Adoption Language: The language of adoption has changed quite markedly over the years, and older terms implying that adoption is the “second best” way to form a family, are now considered quite negative. For instance, the phrase “put up for adoption,” actually originated with the Orphan Train era from 1854 to 1929 when approximately 250,000 orphaned children were transported on trains across America and Canada to new foster and adoptive homes. Children were “put up” on display on the train platform so people could see them and pick a child.

2.3 Terminology

Thinking about the phrase “put up for adoption” in light of its origin makes the image much more negative. The general public may not know this, and we still hear the phrase used, but it has been replaced by phrases such as “make a plan for adoption” or “choose adoption” for a child.

While there are still different preferences in the use of adoption language, there is some clarity about language that should and should not be used.

When you are working with a family, don’t hesitate to ask them about their preferred terminology, such as “birth family,” “first family,” “person who is adopted,” and “kinship caregiver.”

It is also important that you use language that is respectful and supportive of their family and individual members, so it would be wise to discuss adoption language at your first interview, if you have any doubt.

2.4 Language Preferences Activity

Let’s do an activity to get you thinking about positive adoption language. Listen to the following case scenario and identify the negative adoption language.

Frederico was given away by his real mother at birth following an unwanted pregnancy. When he was old enough to ask about his real father, his adoptive parents, who had three children of their own, told him that he was an illegitimate child of mixed race, and no information was available about his real mom and dad.

He was told that it was hard to find information about him since he was a foreign adoption, and tracking down his real parents would be difficult.

Now, click on the negative adoption language from Frederico’s story, then click “Submit.”

2.5 Language Preferences Response

Did you identify the following?

- Given away
- Real mother, real father, real mom and dad
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Children of their own
- Illegitimate child
- Mixed race
- Foreign adoption
- Tracking down his real parents

2.6 Positive Adoption Language

Now let's listen to the scenario again, this time with positive adoption language.

Frederico was placed for adoption by his birth mother following an unplanned pregnancy. When he was old enough to ask about his birth father, his parents, who have three birth children, told him that his birth parents were an unmarried, interracial couple. There was no information available about his birth parents.

He was told that it was hard to find information since his was an intercountry adoption and search and reunion would be difficult.

2.7 Power of Positive Language

As you can see from this example, the power of positive language is significant and can have a profound effect on all members of the adoption triad, and most importantly, the child's sense of self, self-esteem, and identity.

Click on the icon on your screen for a handout: *Watch Your Language!* by Jessica Bliss, LCSW.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Wrapping Up

Using and modeling the language of adoption is an essential building block in shaping adoption competent practice. This language demonstrates an understanding of the adoption experience, conveys respect, and supports the development of deeper connections with children, youth, and families.

3.2 Learning Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

3.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

3.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

3.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed this lesson, The Language of Adoption

In the next lesson, we will focus on the guiding principles that support effective mental health practice with these children, youth, and families.