

Adoption Competency: A Brief Introduction

Adoption competency is not a single practice or protocol but a comprehensive set of knowledge, values, and skills competencies embedded in evidence-informed best professional practices that are more responsive to and effective with adoptive families. Some adoption competent practices are recognized as also appropriate and more responsive to the needs of other types of families formed in ways that differ from birth within a nuclear family (e.g., kinship or foster).

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.

The importance of attachment-focused, trauma-informed approaches became clearer with increasing numbers of children entering adoption with compromised beginnings (e.g., from orphanages in other countries and foster care in the United States). Knowledge from research and practice with adoptive, foster, and kinship families continues to advance and will inevitably produce new insights that will further inform professional practices with families who experience different paths to formation. Within child welfare contexts, the term “child welfare competent” has recently begun to be used to connote the application of adoption competent practices with specific child welfare-involved populations. For example, the

term “adoption/guardianship” competent might be used to describe the use of adoption competent practices, as appropriate, with families formed through guardianship.

The comprehensive set of knowledge, values, and skills competencies embedded in evidence-informed best professional practices that constitute adoption competency do not simply develop through experience but require training, strategic supervision, and opportunities for ongoing professional education to remain current as knowledge advances.

Fortunately, the knowledge, values, and skills undergirding adoption competent practice are well defined and have served as the basis for broadly available trainings. This work was first done in 2009 when the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) convened an expert panel involving researchers, advanced practitioners, and those with lived experience who specified more than 200 competencies in 18 domains for licensed mental health clinicians and provided expert advisory guidance in developing Training for Adoption Competency (TAC). TAC is recognized by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse as a promising practice with high relevance to child welfare and is the only

nationally accredited, assessment-based certificate program in adoption competency. In 2014, C.A.S.E. was awarded a cooperative agreement by the Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau to establish a National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative. Panels of experts, including those with lived experience were again convened and in 2015-2016 defined hundreds of foundational competencies for child welfare (NTI CWP competencies) and mental health professionals (NTI MHP competencies). Two web-based training curricula designed to integrate the competencies into practice were developed and are currently

available free of charge to professionals in any geographic location. While the focus to date has been on specifying and building competencies of mental health and child welfare professionals, understanding of adoption competent practices in education, health care, and other settings continues to grow. Ensuring that all professionals supporting adoptive families have gained critical competencies through the completion of standardized training will further strengthen the continuum of effective post-adoption supports available to adoptive families and ensure child and family well-being.

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Adoption competent practice reflects a deep understanding of the nature of adoption as a form of family formation. Foundational understandings for professionals working with adoptive/foster/kinship families include:

- Family formation by adoption differs from formation through birth and involves normative challenges that can influence identity, family relationships, and psychological adjustment.
- Core issues of adoption are present and can affect members of the adoption kinship network (i.e., adopted person, members of the birth, foster, and adoptive families, relatives, and others important to them) in different ways at different stages.
- Professional approaches are family-based, and strengths-based, and avoid pathologizing patterns of behavior developed in response to past maltreatment or adverse circumstances.
- Adoptive parents have a critical role in facilitating the child's adjustment and healthy identity formation by establishing communicative openness related to adoption.
- Challenging behaviors are recognized as manifestations of an array of biological and experiential risk factors that pre-date adoptive placement; parents are supported in developing an in-depth understanding of their children's unique histories, to reframe behaviors based on their deeper understanding of their children's experiences, to establish developmental stage-appropriate behavioral expectations, and to master the art of therapeutic parenting.
- When children entering an family have experienced early adversity and trauma, parents are supported by professionals to embrace attachment-focused, trauma-informed parenting strategies.
- Acknowledging and honoring connections to the child's past and current relationships with birth family members and kin supports healthy identity formation, attachment, and lifelong relationships.
- Adoption competent practice normalizes help-seeking, viewing it as a strength, rather than an indicator of failure.
- Adoption competent systems of support and services features effective collaboration, communication, and coordination of service delivery are critical in strengthening and preserving families.
- Adoption is not a one-time event but a lifelong process with intergenerational impact.