



ADOPTIONS INC.

Dear Teacher,

At MLJ Adoptions, Inc. we believe that teachers are essential to a child's psychosocial development and learning confidence in his or her ability to be productive and desire for achievement. You get several waking hours each week to influence children and have an ability to (somewhat) shape social interactions. As a therapist, I have watched children both wither in an unsupportive classroom and blossom with a positive classroom. We know that it is not always easy to like and support all children. We also know that many children that have been adopted were in hard places before they joined their family, creating habits of survival behaviors, distressing behaviors, and difficult patterns of interaction. We believe that adoptive parenting is advanced parenting and we invest in educating, preparing and supporting adoptive parents. Because teachers are so important to a child, we are also committed to educating, preparing and supporting teachers.

When adults and children who were adopted discuss concerns about adoption in school, the primary complaint is about assignments and classroom activities more than things that were said. [School Assignments Difficult for Adopted Children and Tips for Teachers](#) is a great place to start to investigate your curriculum and how that can be altered to support children who have been adopted who are in your classroom.

If you were given this guide by an adoptive parent, he or she likely has also sent you a letter introducing his or her specific child to you. [Dear Teacher](#) is a sample letter written about a generic child. If adoptive parents have not reached out to you, we encourage you to connect with the adoptive parent to make sure you understand what may be triggers for that specific student. Each family has specific words that fit best for their child, but we have provided a [What Not To Say](#) handout to help raise awareness of words that are particularly painful to many children.

While you may already understand this learning pattern, [Volleyball, Tennis, and the Adopted Child](#) was written for adoptive parents to help explain why it takes so long for children from hard places to "unlearn" survival behaviors. We include it here since these same behaviors might cause problems in the classroom. Children from hard places often display a variety of attention-seeking behaviors, are sensitive to stress and rejection, and collect things (that may not belong to them) all as a result of their history. These things helped them survive long enough to be in your classroom even if they do not make for a peaceful classroom.

To learn more, you may want to read *Help for Billy* by Heather T. Forbes, *The Connected Child* by Dr. Karyn Purvis, *The Boy That Was Raised as a Dog* by Bruce Perry, *The Whole-Brained Child* by Daniel J. Siegal and Tina Payne Bryson, or *The Out-of-Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kronowitz. Online resources are listed at the end of this letter. Excellent books for the classroom include *Wild About You* by Judy Sierra or *Star of the Week: A story of love, adoption and brownies with sprinkles* by Darlene Friedman.

We are deeply committed to investing in teachers. Please feel free to email or tweet me questions at any time. I am also happy to present to classrooms or groups of teachers whether in person or via online media. You can contact me at Brooke@MLJAdoptions.com or on Twitter at @Choosingchange. If I am unavailable, I have several superb staff members who are more than qualified to also provide this service.

Respectfully,

Brooke Randolph, LMHC
VP of Social Services

- o Adoptive Families school index <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/school/index.php>
- o Educator's Guide to Adoption (not free) <http://www.adoptioninformationinstitute.org/education.html>
- o Funny Q&A for classroom questions <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=766>
- o Adoption in the Schools: A Lot to Learn – Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2006) http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2006_09_Adoption_in_the_Schools_FullReport.pdf
- o Tapestry Books Adoption and School resources <http://www.tapestrybooks.com/categories.asp?cID=271>

School Assignments Difficult for Adopted Children and Tips for Teachers

Brooke Randolph, LMHC

As I prepared for the first "[Adoption for Teachers](#)" seminar the other morning, I had a wonderful conversation on [twitter](#) with some adult adoptees about what [assignments were difficult for them in school](#). It was a great discussion, but maybe the most important point that came out of it is to remember that *every child has a different experience with different concerns and triggers*. During my seminar with the awesome teachers who took an hour to learn more about adoption in the classroom, I encouraged the teachers to stay connected to the parents to be aware of what would impact each child specifically. Teachers, I understand that adoptive parents may be a bit different than other parents, but adoptive parenting may make more sense once you understand our kiddos a little bit more. While every child is different and may or may not be impacted by these classroom activities, below are a few school assignments that have caused distress for children that were adopted and adoptive families (and probably the teacher that made the assignment).



- In my discussion with adoptees, the question we could not answer was the educational purpose behind **Family Tree** assignments. Any teachers care to weigh in? Knowing the purpose behind it is most helpful in creating a curriculum substitution. Even adults whose parents were adopted have told me that such assignments can cause distress because they do not have the information and cannot get the information. Even children in foster care who may know biological family, may not be able to ask them the questions they need answered to be able to complete this assignment. Distress around such assignments can be a reminder of the separation, feeling different from peers because they do not know what others know, feelings of isolation, or feeling that their family is considered abnormal or second best.

Alternatives to the family tree assignment

1. A [Family Forrest](#) can work for children with many non-traditional family structures. How does a child with divorced parents draw a family tree? It seems easier to me to have each child create at least one tree for mom and one tree for dad. For my child it would be one tree for me, one for his Samoan mom, and one for his Samoan dad. Or maybe he would want a separate tree for my mom's family since we have a lot of branches.
 2. Another alternative I like specifically for adoptive families is a single family tree with [Roots and Branches](#). The child is the trunk of the tree, and both families are represented. However this might be more difficult if there is divorce or separation in either family.
 3. A more simplified, less artistic option I have seen is a [Family Wheel](#). The wheel allows children to draw as many slices of the pie as fits for them and to draw it as large as they need.
 4. One of the adult adoptees I spoke with suggested that if there is a need for a genealogy assignment, an actual [Genogram](#) might be in order. While a genogram can get quite in depth, highlighting relational and psychological patterns in a family, it does not have to include that level of detail. The benefit of the genogram is that it is designed with specific symbols for adoption, foster care, and more, making family relationships clear and allowing the child to connect his or her two families.
- Similarly to the family tree, history lessons on **Immigration** may cause distress surrounding missing information, feelings of isolation, a crisis surrounding identity, and more. While children who were born in other countries and joined their families through international adoption are immigrants, they may not want that highlighted. Some may remember their parents being interviewed by immigration officers or embassy officials. Depending on how long they have been in the United States and the [type of visa](#) that allowed entrance into the United States, they may not have received their certificate of citizenship yet. When history lessons include [discrimination](#) against immigrants, this could be a sensitive moment for children feeling different or vulnerable. Children who were adopted domestically or through foster care may not know their genetic history to know from what country their ancestors emigrated, leaving them feeling helpless, different from their peers, and reminded of important information and cultural connections they do not have. Your ancestry may not matter to you, but when you do not have the information it cannot take on greater significance. It is also helpful for teachers to remember that children that are adopted have more than one family. While my son may be the first of his biological relatives to immigrate to the United States, he can also claim my family, and my dad made sure that he knows that he has an ancestor through my family tree that was on the Mayflower. I hope his teachers allow him to claim both one of the earliest immigration stories and one of the most recent.
 - Even if a child is a recent immigrant, it can be insensitive to ask him or her to give a **Presentation on the Country** where he or she was born. Most children who are new to their families and the United States are desperately working to integrate and fit in. They may not appreciate being identified as different. Such assignments can also highlight what they do not know about their country of

origin causing feelings of disconnection and questions about identity. Some children may be excited to [present on the country where they were born](#) even without first-hand knowledge of the culture, but in general I suggest teachers allow children to volunteer or choose which country they would like to present on.

- Such presentations, personal presentations, or **Student Interviews** can all open a child up to difficult questions from peers. ***It has to always be ok for a child to not answer a question that he or she feels is too personal.*** Even the idea of being asked questions by peers may create major anxiety for some children. Teachers also have to be prepared for the information that a child shares which can include stories of a painful past. Children who have been abused or exposed to violence are not as innocent as peers. Even if the child that was adopted is comfortable sharing stories, the information may be uncomfortable for other students.
- **World History** and/or discussions of **Recent Events** may cause distress for children when it highlights negative moments in their country of origin or makes them question how safe biological relatives may be. The recent Asiana plane crash gave me brief panic knowing my cousin would soon be flying from Asia to the United States; imagine how frightening any catastrophe could be not knowing where birth parents reside. Some children may even feel guilty knowing they are in a safer place than biological relatives or have more financial resources. How can you speak respectfully of years of [wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#) without causing distress for children impacted by those wars? Even lessons on the history of prejudice and discrimination in the United States may be difficult for children born in [Bulgaria](#) where discrimination against people of Roma ethnicity still occurs and may have contributed to the reasons that child was separated from his or her birth family.
- **Genetics** lessons can be confusing, frustrating, or even sad for children who are adopted and do not look like their parents. It may be more helpful for teachers to use non-human examples when teaching these science lessons.
- Asking a child to create a personal **Timeline** could stir up many distressing memories and feelings. Some children may not know their own history for periods of several years and there may be no one who does know where they were, who they were with, or what they were doing. Other children may have all of the information, but the truth is painful and not something they wish to share with peers. A timeline can identify adoption for peers, forcing the child to be faced with difficult questions. Even if the child is comfortable with adoption, they may not want peers to know that they have only been with their family for a short period or that they have been with their family for years but the adoption was only recently finalized.
- Sharing photos is another fun assignment for most students that can be distressing for children that have been adopted. Many adopted children do not have access to **Baby Photos**, so can experience much distress if they are the only child in the class who cannot meet the assignment. Bringing in a toddler or preschool photo may cause a child to feel painfully in the spotlight and different from peers. Children who are adopted at later ages may not have any photos of themselves prior to their adoption at ten, 12, or even 15. **Family Photos** can be just as distressing as it highlights that they do not look like other members of their family. Children who have a relationship with or a history with birth family may want to bring in photos of both families.

Adoption is always complicated and every child has a unique story and unique concerns. This can make lessons planning more difficult, but teachers may find that they have a classroom with fewer issues and happier children if they can avoid potential triggers. While the complexities and assignments that can be impacted may be overwhelming, here are four general tips for teachers for classroom success with the child that was adopted:

1. Communicate with adoptive parents and ask for their help and resources. Parents know their children better than anyone else and can help steer you away from topics that may be difficult for everyone. If parents do not [reach out to you](#), reach out to them.
2. Do not make children that have been adopted an exception; change the entire curriculum instead. They already feel different from their peers and most are desperately trying to find where they fit.
3. Create a safe place where they do not have to answer questions if the question is uncomfortable.
4. Pronounce names correctly. Some children adopted internationally will want to use their [birth name](#) in the classroom, but a teacher stumbling over pronunciation may be another thing that highlights that the child is different from peers.

<http://mljadoptions.com/Media.aspx?articleID=878#ixzz2ax7N8mCa>



ADOPTIONS INC.

07/17/2013

[Dear Teacher: a sample letter](#)

As many families are gearing up for school, the impact of adoption in the classroom is forefront in our minds. If a teacher does not understand how adoption can impact your child, things can get difficult quickly. One way that adoptive parents can advocate for their children is by writing a simple note to the teacher. Below is a sample letter that you can alter to fit your family.

Dear Teacher,

I never thought I would be the irritating, over-involved parent, but my child needs me to ensure that you understand adoption and how it impacts him. As his teacher, you are amazingly impactful on his development, not just intellectually, but his psychosocial development as well. Because my child was not with me in his earliest days he has concerns about his value and experiences feelings of rejection. Those may be sensitive subjects for him.

I am his mother, but he also has an [African mother](#). We respect that relationship. We both grieve that he was unable to stay with her there. I am so grateful that I get to raise him every day, but my heart breaks that he has experienced so much loss, pain, and transition in his young life. His relationships in Africa, including biological relatives and other caregivers, are important to him and us. We use the term African Mama not birth mother or biological mother.

A [traditional family](#) tree assignment will not work for my child. He would need several trees. Assignments that include asking for baby photos or other childhood photos may be very painful for him as we do not have those photos. Those simple genetics activities that are popular in elementary school may be something he cannot complete and it may be upsetting to him. It may take some creativity to come up with different assignments for the class, but I would be happy to help. It is part of my responsibility as my child's adoption advocate.

My child does not look like me, our genetics are not the same, but I am raising him. He may behave in ways you would not expect based on his appearance. I am teaching him that people in America may assume negative things based solely on appearance, but I hope the people he interacts with regularly will judge him by the content of his character and yet remember that he has experienced more pain in his short life than his peers, and those experiences can occasionally be distracting.

English was not the first language to which my child was exposed. There are still words and cultural references that he does not understand. I know my child can be obstinate at times – that skill likely helped him survive in an orphanage – but sometimes he truly may not understand. Can you be understanding that obstinance is a skill he developed and he is still learning it no longer benefits him and keeps him safe.

Because he has had so many influences, identity is not a simple question for my child. I have given him an English name that you can pronounce and spell. I believe it will help him navigate life in America. There may be days or even years when he prefers to identify himself with his African name. We love that name, currently his middle name, as well. He is welcome to use that name and ask others to call him by his African name rather than his American name.

I know adoption and [transracial families](#) can be difficult to explain to children sometimes. My agency is happy to send someone to talk about adoption to the children or staff, even provide in service training or education. I am happy to help make those contacts for you or bring in adoption books to read to the class if you think it would help. My agency teaches that adoptive parenting is advanced parenting. Some days it feels like that, but mostly it simply pulls on my heart to give more because of what he has missed. He may be more complicated than some of your other students. I am here to help you teach him and integrate him into your classroom. If his reactions confuse you or seem irrational, hopefully I can "translate" for you.

Thank you for giving yourself and teaching these children every day. You play such a major role in their lives. I hope I can be a resource to you. Please never hesitate to reach out if there is a way I can help or a question I can answer for you.

Photo Credit: [Rupert Ganzer](#)

Brooke Randolph, LMHC



What Not To Say

- **Anything negative about birth family, birth country (even politics), birth culture** - The child will interpret your negativity as negative beliefs about him or her.
- **Oriental, wetback, Negro, nigger, monkey... or any other derogatory or racist language** - Avoid any and all prejudice. If you hold any prejudice (we all do), a child understands that you can also discriminate against him or her.
- **Real or natural parent or child** - These suggest that the relationships by adoption are not of the same quality or second-class.
- **Foreign adoption, foreign child, foreign country** - These can make a child feel abnormal, like an alien, and as if he or she does not belong.
- **Blood relative** - Blood can be "icky". This term can suggest that blood is more important than love and relationship. Don't you have "blood relatives" with who you have very little relationship by choice?
- **Get, obtain** - These project ownership or a right and strip child of right to grieve what has been lost.
- **Gotcha Day** - Not only does the term "gotcha" reflect ownership, it has other negative connotations. Most importantly celebrating this day brings to attention all the pain and loss that occurred prior to the adoption. Not all children will want to celebrate this day, but they may feel obligated due to parents' enthusiasm. Celebrating such an anniversary can create negative feelings in biological children or be complicated when a family adopts more than once. If your child chooses to celebrate this anniversary, consider terms like "family day" rather than "gotcha day".
- **Bad boy or bad girl - A child's value is never based on behavior. It also introduces the idea that behavior may have been the reason for "rejection" by birth mother.**
- **Is adopted** - While the impact of adoption is on-going, the legal process is (eventually) completed, and the child is a full member of the family. Discussing adoption as on-going continues instability and anxiety for the child.
- **Giving away, giving up, adopt out, keep, "a gift"** - These suggest that the child was not loved or loved enough by the birth mother, and that the child is something that can be given away or given up on. Life-shaping decisions were made by others for this child, leaving him or her feeling out of control.
- **Lucky** - Before a child can be adopted, he or she must lose so many things. You do not feel "lucky" to inherit money if it means a loved one has died.
- **Unwanted, problem, accidental pregnancy** - This can cause the child feel like a problem, an accident, and unwanted.
- **Adopted child** - It is not necessary to identify the child as adopted most of the time; it is not the most important aspect about that child. If adoption needs to be identified, use person-first language: "son that was adopted".
- **Adoptable, available** - You do not shop for children at Wal-Mart or bid for them on E-bay! They are not a commodity.
- **Do not discuss the cost of adoption** (see back)

Be Careful Saying These Things

- **Chosen** - In order to be chosen by the adoptive family, the birth mother must first chose not to parent, thus being chosen also means being not chosen. No one wanted to be chosen last for dodgeball.
- **Good boy or good girl** - If a child can be "good" (valued) based on behavior, then, in turn, he or she can also be "bad" (unvalued) based on behavior.
- **Birth mother/birth family, biological mother/family** - Some families will prefer to identify "Chinese family", not cutting off the relationship at birth.

- **Mine, my child** - This can project ownership or a right to this child, stripping him or her of the right to love and grieve what has been lost; however, it also identifies for the child that he or she does have an important place in your family.
- **Adoptive parent** - While a parent may choose to identify with adoption as a factor that impacts their parenting, he or she is a parent and a parent first.
- **Adoptee** - Never use for a child; only use if the person self-identifies as an adoptee, using the term first. This term identifies adoption as the most important aspect about him or her.

What to Say

- **Was adopted** - The legal process is complete, the child is a full-fledged member of the family
- **Identify ways child is like family members** - Consider behaviors, preferences, skills, and even physical features
- **Born in _____(country), international adoption, inter-country adoption**
- **Joined our family**

Please examine the *possible meanings or feelings that could be perceived behind every word you use.*

The Cost of Adoption

The cost of adoption is difficult for many adults to understand, and can be confusing emotionally for children that have been adopted. Ethical, legal adoptions do not include any fees for a child. The fees involved are for professional services and filing paperwork with various governmental bodies. An adoption requires professional services from attorneys, social workers, translators, and many others. The vast majority of the funds collected by an adoption agency are paid out on the adopting families behalf or cover necessary items such as postage and paper.

When the cost of adoption is discussed, a child is not able to understand filing fees and professional services. Rather than interpreting his or her worth, the child is most likely to hear either that he or she is a commodity to be purchased and owned, not an individual, or that he or she was a strain to his or her parents and may owe them something in return. These are not healthy beliefs for a child. When fundraising is discussed, a child may feel like his or her parents cannot afford to support him or her, creating fear of separation, especially for those born in a poor country where poverty is often a reason for relinquishment. Discussions of fundraising can also cause a child to believe that part of him or her is owned by other adults who made a donation.

While our culture is sharing information more and more frequently, money is often a sensitive subject. Many find it inappropriate or offensive to discuss financial matters, and this includes the cost of adoption. Parents, you do not need to warn others about the cost; that information is widely available. If you feel the need to discuss the financial strain, consider if you need to manage stress or are seeking attention and validation. If someone in the community asks in front of your child, you can tell them it was manageable (you did do it!), and if they would like detailed information they can contact you separately and hand them a business card. Better yet, hand them the card for your adoption agency who can best answer such questions as the world of adoption is constantly changing. Supports, please, do not ask such questions in front of children - even within a one block radius because their hearing is amazing. If you are truly seeking information because you are also interested in adoption, you can ask for contact information for the adoption agency and seek out updated, accurate information and resources.

Volleyball, Tennis, and Adoptive Parenting

04/04/2012

Brooke Randolph, LMHC

I was a volleyball player. I played in off-season traveling leagues. I went to out of state training camps each summer. Only an injury got me to quit, but only after playing through it for over a year. I can still, practically subconsciously, demonstrate the different technique drills I was taught and rehearsed around the gym for hours a day. My muscles automatically drop me into proper form as I *left, right, lift*.

In high school, I decided to pick up tennis as a Spring sport, even though I had never played before. There were a lot of volleyball skills that helped me pick up tennis more quickly, but there was one major exception. I can still hear, "Quit serving like a volleyball player! You're on the tennis court now!" yelled across the practice courts. Volleyball was ingrained in me. Coach DeVault could have me serve for hours a day, but there was enough similarity in the motion that I automatically reverted to the skills I had previously learned. Unfortunately serving in volleyball is not the same as serving in tennis, and the racket is not the only difference. His yelling and instruction could not re-shape me entirely. I now know enough about neurology to know that I was not getting enough reward to change what I was doing.



I wanted to learn to play tennis well. I was a driven, competitive, not-quite perfectionistic teen. The majority of my serves on the tennis court were "in", but that was not good enough for me. Despite the yelling, I believe Coach DeVault cared about us as individuals and cared about teaching, but he was teaching the Varsity and the JV teams concurrently; he could not immediately reward every success or every step closer to success. I was too hard on myself to notice incremental improvement, and he was too busy. Without any reward (verbal affirmation from my coach and/or positive affect of pride from my successes), I was not cementing the skills on which I was working.

When a child is adopted, he or she is a volleyball player who suddenly finds him or herself on a tennis court. All he or she knows how to do is play volleyball, and he or she will call on those skills to try to succeed in this strange new environment. Because I had practiced volleyball so intensely, it would have taken me twice as long practicing my tennis serve before I could master the new skill without calling back on the skill that made me successful on the volleyball court. Children that are adopted have to both learn new skills that are functional in a family and unlearn skills that helped them survive in an institution; because they must both learn and unlearn, learning takes *longer*. They are approaching the tennis court like a volleyball player, making tennis more difficult to learn. Parents of children that have been adopted need more *patience* as their children learn the skills that will help them navigate the world.

If my coach had been able to notice each time I maintained the right tennis posture when I served or I struck the ball at the correct angle, I could have been rewarded by verbal affirmation and experienced positive affect. If I was less competitive, I might have been able to notice this incremental success and experience positive affect as a result. The reward of positive affect makes it more likely that a behavior will be repeated. **Children that have been adopted are primed to survive, not to notice incremental success. It is important for parents to provide positive reinforcement for even the smallest improvement to help the child know exactly what he or she is doing right.** They know they aren't on the volleyball court any longer, but that doesn't mean they know how to play tennis just yet.

Read more: <http://www.mljadoptions.com/Media.aspx?articleID=449#ixzz2Bq0QtJhc>