

ADOPTION AT SCHOOL **101**

10 ways to ensure that adoption is treated accurately and sensitively at school.



1 Write a letter to your child's teacher.

Briefly explain your family's background, and provide her with language to use when talking about adoption in the classroom. Make it clear that you believe that adoption is something to be celebrated, not hidden, and let her know that you are available as a resource in the classroom. Find sample letters to use when composing your own at adoptivefamilies.com/school.



3 Read an adoption storybook to your child's class.

Young children may have an easier time understanding a new topic when it's introduced in the context of a story. Use a book to begin an adoption presentation, or offer to read to the class during regular story hour. AF readers' favorites include:

* *A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza (Putnam Juvenile; ages 3-6). A little bird searches for a mother and is welcomed

into Mrs. Bear's home. This sweet story is reassuring for young kids.

* *All About Adoption*, by Marc Nemiroff (Magination Press; ages 4-8). This book explains adoption and explores the feelings that children experience as they grow.

* *Happy Adoption Day*, by John McCutcheon (Little, Brown; ages 3-6). This lyrical read-aloud is a perfect choice to cap off a presentation—or to accompany cupcakes if you plan on celebrating your child's adoption day with classmates.

* *How I Was Adopted*, by Joanna Cole (Harper Trophy; ages 4-8). Unlike most other children's adoption books, Cole's story begins with, and explains, birth.

* *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born*, by Jamie Lee Curtis (HarperTrophy; ages 4-10). The engaging storyline and fun illustrations will capture every child's interest.

To keep adoption stories on the radar year-round, donate a set of books to your child's classroom or the school library.



2 Give an adoption presentation.

This is a great way to educate your child's peers, and teachers are usually enthusiastic. Explain adoption in a general way, rather than tell your child's particular story. Here's a simple, parent-tested presentation to use as a model for kids in the early grades:

* Bring in one of your child's dolls or stuffed animals. Tell everyone the toy's name—Annie, for example—and let the students hold her.

* Stand at the blackboard and ask the kids to help you complete a list: "What parents do" (feed, clothe, change, hug and kiss, and so on). If the kids don't say "give birth" or "bring babies into the world," add it to the list.

* Tell them that Annie's birth parents brought her into the world, but they realized they could not do all the other things parents do. Tell them that Annie's forever parents wanted to do all those things for her, even though they didn't bring her into this world.

* Finish by explaining that Annie has two sets of "real" parents—her real birth parents and her real forever family—and that she needs both to be who she is.

4 Team up with the teacher.

Parental involvement can be the key to a successful school year. Schedule a one-on-one meeting to introduce yourself and your family and to:

* Ask whether she's planning assignments that require baby photos or family infor-

mation (the family tree, an autobiographical timeline, "star of the week"), and present alternatives [see #5].

* Offer to give a classroom presentation, to talk with other teachers, and to be on call for questions that arise. If the teacher hasn't had much experience with adoption, your offer will be reassuring—and will let her know that adop-

tion is not shameful.

- * Explain how adoption may come up in the classroom. For example, if you are in an open adoption, let her know that your child may refer to her birth mother by name.
- * Suggest ways to answer questions that students may have. For example:

Q: "Who are Ben's real parents?"

A: "Ben's real parents are the parents who are raising him—John and Kathy, who

pick him up from school every day. He also has birth parents, who gave birth to him."

Q: "Why didn't Ben's first family want him?"

A: "They probably wanted him very much, but couldn't take care of any baby at that time. They wanted him to have a family to love him and take care of him forever."

Q: "Where is Ben from?"

A: "He's from [our state]. He was born in Russia, but now he's a U.S. citizen, like you."



like any other parents.

- * Mentioning adoption from time to time, in a matter-of-fact way, helps kids see that it is a normal life experience for many families. For example, when studying biology and genetics, adoption can be discussed in the context of nature vs. nurture.

- * All parents will appreciate more inclusive versions of "star of the week," as well as of autobiographical timeline and family tree projects.

After your discussion, donate a packet of educator materials to the school. AF recommends:

Adoption and the Schools, a 256-page resource, compiled by Families Adopting in Response (fairfamilies.org); the Institute for Adoption Information's helpful *Educator's Guide to Adoption* (adoptioninformationinstitute.org); and *S.A.F.E. at School*, a manual that outlines a five-point plan for ensuring an adoption-friendly school environment, offered by the Center for Adoption Support and Education (adoptionsupport.org).



5 Propose alternatives to sticky assignments.

Projects designed to explore a child's past can be difficult for our kids. Encourage your child's teacher to present several options to the entire class, not just to your child. Here are ideas for inclusive projects:

- * **Family Tree:** Students can draw themselves on the trunk of a tree and draw someone whom they love on each branch, regardless of biological or adoptive relationships. Or they can place names of adoptive family members in the branches of a tree and birth family members in its roots. Alternately, children can

draw or write the names of family members inside the outline of a house.

*** Timeline:** Instead of starting with their birthdates, have students cite memorable events from each calendar year they've been alive. Older students can create a timeline that includes a national or world event from each decade of the last century.

*** Star of the Week:** Request that students be allowed to bring in photographs of themselves from a year or two ago, rather than baby pictures.



7 Prepare your child to answer questions.

Your child may want to answer differently, depending on her mood and who's asking. Here are a few options she can practice:

Q: "Where are you from?"

A: "Are you asking where I was born or where I live?" or "I'm from New York, like you."

Q: "Is that your real mom?"

A: "Yes. She dropped me off at school today," or "Do you mean my birth mother? I don't live with my birth mother."

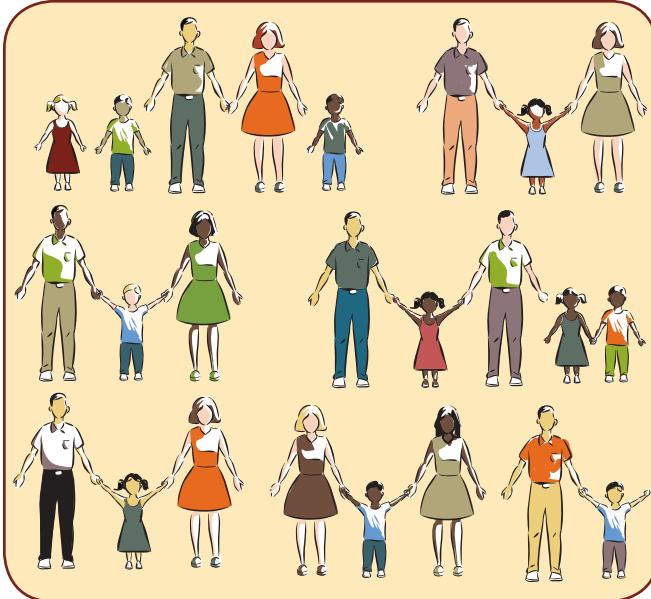
Q: "Why didn't your real mother want you?"

A: "Are you asking why I was placed for adoption?" or "My birth mother couldn't take care of any new child."

Q: "Is that your real sister? You look different."

A: "We have different birth parents, but are part of the same family," or "Yes."

8 Place adoptive families in a broader context.



Ask the teacher to plan a lesson on nontraditional families, including single-parent, step, gay/lesbian, grandparent-headed, and adoptive. Here are some children's books and videos that send an inclusive message:

* *The Family Book*, by Todd Parr (Little, Brown; ages 3-6). This cheery, colorful book helps kids understand that diversity is a natural—and beautiful—part of life.

* *All Families Are Different*, by Sol Gordon (Prometheus Books; ages 4-8). Written from a child's point of view, this book suggests sample dialogue. For example, "If other kids tease

you because your family is 'different,' just say, 'Yeah, they are! All families are different.'"

* *Families Are Different*, by Nina Pellegrini (Scholastic; ages 4-8). When an adoptee worries because she doesn't look like her family, her mom helps her understand that all families are different.

* *That's a Family*, by Ground-Spark (groundspark.org; ages 8-12). This 30-minute documentary introduces viewers to a wide range of real families. Educators can use the accompanying Discussion and Teaching Guide to plan related lessons.



9 Celebrate racial and cultural diversity.

Many school curricula include international culture fairs or country reports. Volunteer to make dishes from the cultures of origin in your family, or to read traditional folktale, play music, or bring in clothing or artifacts.

Holiday activities are engaging ways to introduce different cultures. Encourage the school to observe diverse

holidays, such as Cinco de Mayo, Kwanzaa, and Diwali. In December, kids will enjoy learning how people around the world celebrate Christmas. Find details on Russian Christmas and La Navidad at adoptivefamilies.com/holidays. *Children Just Like Me: Celebrations*, by Anabel Kindersley (Dorling Kindersley), invites further exploration.

10 Educate other parents and the community.

The parents of your child's classmates may not know how to talk with their children about adoption. Lend them a hand by downloading "Helping Classmates Understand Adoption," from adoptivefamilies.com/free-downloads, and giving it to the teacher to distribute to all the students. AF's handout covers conversation guidelines, adoption myths and realities, and sample questions and answers.

Suggest a community service project for National Adoption Day, in November. This day celebrates the adoptions of children from foster care. Your child's class might accept donations of food and clothing for foster families, make cards thanking foster parents for the work they do, or donate and wrap holiday gifts for local foster kids. Visit nationaladoptionday.org for more ideas.

A collage of resources for National Adoption Day, including a website screenshot, a handout titled "Helping Classmates Understand Adoption", and a "Myths & Realities About Adoption" page.

Extra Credit Find many more resources to make this school year a successful one—printable handouts, parents' "scripts" for their adoption presentations, family tree templates, and more—at adoptivefamilies.com/school.