

# Reducing Family Stress

## FosterParentCollege.com® A Viewer Guide

### Introduction to the Course

The majority of children in foster care return to their birth families or to other family members, but some become available for adoption. This class will explore the adoption process and what to expect. It examines pre-placement issues, myths surrounding adoption, and issues the post-adoptive family may face. An examination of the perspectives of everyone involved in the adoption process provides valuable insight. This course also looks at the different types of foster care and the differences between foster care and adoption.

Betsy Keefer Smalley, LSW, Director of Foster Care and Adoption Training, Institute for Human Services (IHS), Columbus, Ohio, shares her years of experience.



*Betsy  
Keefer Smalley, LSW*

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Understand how the adoption process works and what to expect.
2. Understand pre-placement issues.
3. Dispel myths about adoption.
4. Understand post-adoption issues and challenges.
5. Describe how foster care, kinship care, and adoption differ.

This companion guide provides the content of this course.

A child or youth who has been freed for adoption by the court can be involved in several different scenarios:

1. The foster family providing care might be willing to adopt. In this case, the child or youth does not have to change families. This option makes the transition to adoption easier and reduces the risk of placement failure.
2. If the foster family does not wish to adopt, the agency seeks an adoptive home for the child.
3. Older youth who have been freed for adoption might stay with foster families in guardianship or long-term foster care.
4. Some youth end up living in a group home until emancipated.

In the first interactive exercise, viewers are asked to identify misinformation and myths about adopting youth in care. A statement is made about adoption, and viewers are asked to sort the information into true, false, or not sure. Statements are followed by the correct selection and an explanation.

**Parents have the same parenting issues whether their child was adopted or born into the family.**

*False. There are significant differences between raising a biological child and raising a child who has been adopted. Many people believe in the “myth of sameness,” thinking that there are no real differences.*

**Adoptive parents who are experiencing trouble with the adopted child are often afraid to ask anyone for help.**

*True. This is often the case. Adoptive parents sometimes believe they should project the appearance that everything is just fine.*

**Adopted children are glad that they are adopted.**

*Not sure. It could be true for some adopted children, but not for others. Sometimes there is a mix of feelings: loss, confusion, relief, fear, happiness, and disappointment. Whether children join their adoptive families as infants, toddlers, or older children, they will have questions and concerns about why they are not with their birth families.*

**A child who discusses and addresses his or her own feelings about being adopted is usually satisfied and finished dealing with the related issues by young adulthood.**

*False. Issues related to adoption can emerge throughout the life of the person. School-age children are old enough to understand adoption; and adoptive parents can help them by addressing the children’s questions and feelings about their own adoption.*

**A large percentage of adoptees consider searching for their birth parents.**

*True. Most adoptees at least consider searching. About one third of adult adoptees actively try to connect with either birth parents or birth siblings. Many adoptive parents cognitively understand the need for information or connection but might fear losing their child’s loyalty and affection.*

**Birth parents “forget” about their children in a few years and don’t care what happens to them.**

*False. Most birth parents love their children, even if they were not able to provide stable homes for them. They do not forget their children and are significantly impacted throughout life by the loss of their children.*

**Many adoptees feel rejected by their birth families and fear the adoptive parents will reject them too.**

*True. Many adopted children do feel abandoned by their birth parents, and they worry their adoptive parents may abandon them as well. Most adopted children and youth, even those adopted as infants, experience some level of anxiety about separation and loss.*

## Alissa's Story, Part 1

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Alissa, a young woman who is a college graduate and living independently, shares her story of growing up as an adopted child.

*My parents were divorced when I was 5 years old so most of the memories I have of my family are of my older sister and my mother. Growing up, my mother seemed happy and proud to be an adoptive parent and, as a result, I grew up being proud and happy to be adopted. I never perceived adoption as a disadvantage or problem, or felt different from my peers who more closely resembled their parents. My adoptive mother has never made me feel second best or as if she would prefer to have a child she'd given birth to herself. She has always said that my sister and I are better than any children she might have given birth to. Any difficulties I experienced as a child were related more to the ignorance or assumptions made by other people about how I felt as an adoptee.*

## Concurrent Planning

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The foster care to adoption path may vary from state to state. All states have the obligation to do concurrent planning when a child is placed in foster care. More than one plan with the goal of providing a permanent home for the child is developed:

- Tier 1 is reunification with the birth family;
- Tier 2 is finding kinship placement; and
- Tier 3 is the foster care to adoption plan.

If these options are not available, the agency then seeks an adoptive family. The last resort would be placement in a group home.

Families who foster with the intention of adopting often face a roller coaster of emotion. These parents frequently have histories of infertility and loss and often they do not know if the child in their care will be available for them to adopt. These situations present an emotional challenge for foster parents who are asked to work with the primary family toward the goal of reunification.

Foster families who want to adopt children in their care might need extra support in the form of opportunities to honestly and openly discuss their feelings (especially if they have resistance to forming a relationship with the birth family), transition services, and grief and loss counseling.

## The Foster-to-Adoption Process

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The agency responsible for placing the child in care is also placed in a conflicting situation. Since the agency wants to limit the number of placements for the child, it would choose a foster family that has the potential to adopt the child. However, agency staff must work toward reunification with the birth family. If reunification is not possible, the agency then seeks kinship care. If kinship care is found, the child is no longer available for adoption by the foster family. If kinship care is not a viable choice, foster parents make the best adoptive parents for two reasons:

1. The foster parents already know the child, are attached to him or her, and tend to have more realistic expectations.
2. The child doesn't move from the foster home, so the child's loss and separation issues are minimized.

Even if the child is living in the house, the foster parents will still need to be supported by the agency through the adoption process to ensure success. Expectations need to be realistic, and the parents need to expect the child to have strong feelings of grief and loss when the child's parents' rights are terminated.

Foster parents often are not fully prepared for the issues, challenges, and responsibilities of adoption. The next card deck interactive looks at how foster and kinship care differ from adoption. Viewers are asked to sort the cards into the correct piles. The correct response is followed by an explanation.

**There is reimbursement of money to the family for care given.**

*Foster care. In foster care, the family is reimbursed for each month of temporary care given to the child.*

**Money subsidies are given to permanent parents of special needs kids.**

*Adoption. Families who adopt children with special needs can be subsidized by the state.*

**A family member could be licensed for foster care or could adopt and receive a subsidy.**

*Kinship care. In a kinship situation, the response depends on the legal status of the child. If the child is in the temporary custody of the agency, the kinship parent might be licensed to foster. If the child is free for adoption, the kinship parent may choose to adopt.*

**The state has regulations about how many children are allowed to sleep in a bedroom.**

*Foster care. In foster care, the agency follows state regulations on how many children to a bedroom and assures only one child to a bed.*

**The parents will make the decision if a child requests getting an ear pierced.**

*Adoption. Adoptive parents have the responsibility for making parenting decisions. In foster care, the birth parents have this responsibility. For example, foster parents could not sign permission for a child to get an ear piercing; the birth parents would need to do that.*

**Consent for surgery is decided by a judge or agency.**

*Foster care. In foster care, the child is a ward of the state. Therefore, a judge or agency will decide about surgery. Also, the birth parents retain some residual parental rights and must be consulted about certain medical decisions. Foster parents may not sign permission for surgeries.*

**Consent for surgeries is made by the permanent parents.**

*Adoption. If the child is adopted, the adoptive parents would make the decision about surgery and provide consent.*

## **Differences in Types of Care**

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Agencies make decisions about placement based on the child's basic needs for safety, permanency, and well-being:

- Safety – The child is physically and mentally free from harm.
- Permanency – The child has a permanent placement as soon as possible.
- Well-being – The chosen situation meets the child's needs and provides a nurturing, healthy environment.

Foster care, kinship care, and adoptive care differ in several ways:

- Foster care
  - temporary placement
  - birth family has legal right to contact
  - parents involved in decisions that affect the child
- Adoption
  - child is a full family member
  - adoptive parents have all legal rights and responsibilities
  - new birth certificate is issued with adoptive parents' names
- Kinship care
  - can be legal guardianship, fostering, or adoption
  - care is dependent on needs of the child, the case plan, and the involvement of the birth parents
  - decisions about the child are based on the type of care

## Alissa's Story, Part 2 & Adoption Today

*I have known I was adopted for as long as I can remember. My mother never lied and has always been open with me about my adoption. She told me from the beginning that my birth mother did not give me up because I was unwanted. She believed she was not capable of caring for me and providing me with the life she wanted me to have, and decided that relinquishing me would be the right thing for her to do for me.*

*I have always had free access to information about my immediate and extended birth family and my mother has shared information about the physical and dispositional similarities between them and myself. I also feel connected to my birth family through my adoptive mother's acceptance of them and her willingness to include them in my life based on my wishes and expressed needs. I have never experienced loss because my birth family has always been a part of my life. I receive cards, letters, and photos from my birth family and, if I ever feel the need, I know I can contact them and that my adoptive mother will help me locate them.*

Alissa's story continues:

*I always felt that I could be open about how I felt as an adopted child because all of my questions were accepted and addressed in a candid and compassionate manner. I was provided with all the information I requested and, if my mother did not have the information, she always offered to try to acquire it for me. In addition, my mother has also been open with me about how she feels as an adoptive parent. Just as some children have concerns about being adopted, my mother has had concerns as an adoptive parent. She feared my sister and I wouldn't love her as much as our birth parents or would wish we had grown up in our biological families.*

Adoption has changed over the years. In the past, the goal of adoption was to find a child to "complete" the family. Today, the goal of adoption is to provide a safe, permanent home that is dedicated to the child's well-being. The adoption process has two steps:

1. The parental rights and responsibilities of the birth parents are terminated.
2. New legal rights and obligations are created between the adoptive parents and the child.

To address the feelings of love and loyalty adopted children might have toward their birth families, most states allow ongoing relationships with the birth family at the discretion of the adoptive parents. In many states, openness in adoption and contact between the birth family and the adopted child are developed, especially when siblings are involved. These usually are not legally enforceable. Some states are now offering "openness" post-adoption agreements that can be legally binding. However, the best interest of the child must always be considered.

Many experts feel it is important that the adopted child learn about adoption even before he or she is old enough to fully grasp what that means. This eliminates the need to "find the right time" to tell a child how he joined the family. Waiting until adolescence or young adulthood to reveal the information can lead to anger and mistrust.

## The Adoption Experience

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A slide show reviews some issues to consider regarding the adoption experience.

### **An adoptive family might experience the child as having:**

#### **Multiple allegiances**

*Adopted children may have ongoing feelings of love and loyalty toward birth family members and previous foster families as well. These feelings need to be respected so as not to intensify the children's conflicts. Children should not be expected to choose which family to love. All of us can love many people at the same time.*

#### **Complex histories**

*The adopted child may have had many experiences that have traumatized him or her and will require special sensitivity. A traumatized child will likely need years to heal.*

#### **Identity issues**

*The adopted child might ask his family questions about his identity and cultural heritage. Family members need to respect the culture of the child and be prepared to give unbiased responses to any questions. The child could feel confused about who he is, as well as the adoption situation. Parents will need to talk with the child about his identity and help him to develop positive self-esteem.*

#### **Unrealistic expectations**

*Both the adopted child and adoptive parents can have unrealistic expectations about what adoption means.*

#### **Sensitivity about language used to describe the child**

*To help a child feel comfortable with himself, the family needs to use positive terms like a "child with special needs" instead of describing a child as "hard to place." Another positive way of describing the situation is to say, "the birth parents made an adoption plan for the child" instead of saying they "gave the child up" or chose a "voluntary adoption." Of course, refer to the child's birth parents as birth parents, not as "real parents." Language makes a difference!*

#### **Special sensitivity regarding separation and loss**

*An adopted child may overreact to situations involving separations, such as the first day of school, a sleepover with a friend, or a parent's business trip. Adoptive parents need to be sensitive to the child's fear of abandonment.*

#### **Feelings of low self-esteem, rejection, and guilt**

*Some adopted children assume they were responsible for the loss of the birth family due to some flaw in themselves. They may suffer from feelings of guilt, shame, or extreme rejection due to the loss of the birth family.*

#### **Feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, loss of control, and being different**

*Some adopted children, having lost at least one family in the past, may experience anxiety, fearing that*

*they will lose their adoptive family. This may be particularly intense during times of the year when the children have moved in the past. Adopted children might see themselves as different from other children who have always lived with their birth parents.*

Viewers are directed to read the handout “The Seven Wonders of Adoption.”

## **Predictors of Placement Disruption**

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A “matched” adoption is one in which the adopting parents did not foster the child before adopting. In this situation the new parents may:

- lack information about the child’s history
- have difficulty coping with behavioral and emotional issues
- not understand issues related to past losses and traumas

In the foster-to-adoption situation, the parents:

- have a greater understanding of the child’s needs and behaviors
- may be more experienced parents

Both foster-to-adopt and matched adoptive parents encounter similar post-adoption problems:

- serious adjustment problems
- mental health issues and externalizing behaviors such as lying, stealing, and self-harm

Regardless of the path taken to adoption, both foster-to-adopt and matched parents frequently have unrealistic expectations about adoption. That is a key risk factor for difficulties following the adoption finalization.

The prevalence of mental health problems in children in care is three to seven times higher than in the general population. These children often exhibit serious adjustment problems and externalizing behaviors such as lying, stealing, and self-harm.

Disruptive, aggressive, and dangerous behaviors are the most common reasons parents request removal of the child from their home.

Common child behaviors adoptive parents might expect include:

- lying and manipulation
- defiance
- verbal and physical aggression
- violation of family norms
- sexual acting out
- tantrums

Adoptive parents need to know how to work with the child to better understand the underlying cause and function of these behaviors. Parents need to be able to observe not only surface behaviors, but the context in which they occur, and the feelings, thoughts, and past events that may be triggering the behavior. Behavioral interventions that focus on the deeper cause of the behavior will be more successful. Parents need to understand they should not take the behavior personally; many variables- environmental and biological- impact the child's responses and adjustments.

Viewers are encouraged to view a companion class in this series, "Understanding Behavior in Foster Children" and read the handout "Externalizing Behaviors Reported by Adoptive Parents."

## **Adjusting to Adoption**

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Regardless of the path the adoptive parents have taken to bring a child into their home, everyone will need continued help and support, especially if the child has special needs.

Not all adopted children have behavioral problems or mental health diagnoses; some are very resilient and adjust well to being adopted. Other children come into an adoptive home with familial histories of severe mental illness and environmental vulnerabilities.

Parents are encouraged to seek professional help for any adopted child who is having difficulty adapting. Biological children might also need additional support to adjust to the new family structure and dynamic. Parents are encouraged to seek professional guidance to help them cope with the challenges and struggles. They might want to join a support group for adoptive parents. Outside support will help parents understand they are not alone and keep a positive family attitude.

## Alissa's Story, Part 3

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Alissa's story comes to a conclusion:

*I have never felt any void in my life or resented my birth family for putting me up for adoption. I was raised in a very loving home and have had a life full of opportunities that I may not have experienced otherwise, including my education and my travel experiences.*

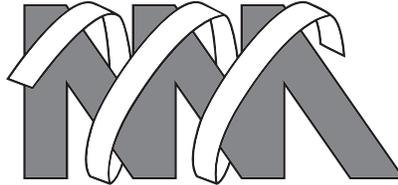
*My mother and my sister are the most important people to me and, had I not been adopted, I don't think I would be the person I am today. I feel privileged to be a member of my adoptive family and, although I have not seen my birth family since I was an infant, I feel connected to them through the information I have. I have never felt a need for face-to-face contact with my birth family; however, I know that if I ever do, my adoptive family will be completely supportive.*

*Understanding, acceptance, and openness are the basis of my relationship with my adoptive parent. Adoption is a two-way street that my mother, and sister and I traveled together, and I never felt alone. I would say that successful adoptions are a result of respectful and compassionate adoptive parents building respectful and compassionate relationships with their adopted child and teaching them that being different is cause for celebration.*

Viewers are reminded to access the printable handouts that accompany this course and are encouraged to rewatch relevant portions of the course.

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