

Teaching Modifications and Adopted Children/Families

These data come from a survey that Abbie Goldberg (Clark University) and Harold Grotevant (UMass Amherst) did in Spring 2021 of over 200 teachers from across the U.S. Teachers spanned all grade levels and were equally represented at elementary, secondary, and high school levels. Teachers reported on whether and how they made various modifications to language, assignments, books/materials, curriculum, and disciplinary practices to be more inclusive of adopted children and their families.

MODIFICATION (N, %)	YES	EXAMPLES
Language (e.g., including adoptive families as one type of family; avoiding language like “Adopt-a-Highway”)	145 (70.0%)	1. Referring to parents as “your grown-ups”, “adults at home”, “guardians” and “caregivers”, as opposed to mothers, fathers, and parents
		2. Calling family trees “family genograms”
		3. Avoiding use of “adopting” when referring to fundraising, sponsorship, etc. (e.g., “adopting shelves” in a library)
		4. Avoiding use of terms like “real parents” and “given up [for adoption]”; using terms like “biological parents” and “placed for adoption”/“making an adoption plan”
		5. Using expansive definitions and language surrounding family (e.g., some families have...others have...)
		6. Using the language that families use/prefer
Assignments (e.g., family tree/family history assignments)	116 (56.0%)	1. Modifying genetics, DNA, family history assignments (e.g., not referring to material from “mom and dad” but “from the egg and the sperm”)
		2. Modifying family tree assignments (e.g., offering an expansive/chosen family definition) or avoiding these assignments
		3. Avoiding Mother’s and Father’s Day celebrations and assignments, or providing options to choose from
		4. Avoiding baby photo assignments or contests
		5. “Case by case basis” approach (e.g., we contacted the parents to find out if assignment would be a problem; we allowed student to skip a heritage assignment)
Books, materials	95 (45.9%)	1. Avoidance of books or music that narrowly defines or celebrates a particular type of family
		2. Displaying, assigning, and discussing books and materials that highlight diverse families, including adoptive families and multiracial families
		3. Avoidance of books and materials that negatively stereotype adoption or adopted people (e.g., that “villainize or romanticize the orphan or orphanage experience”)
Curriculum	72 (34.8%)	1. Discussing diverse family traditions
		2. Using books, movies, etc. that have adopted children or adoptive families as main characters
		3. Discussing artists, historical figures, etc. from a variety of backgrounds/cultures

		4. Using visuals (e.g., handouts, videos) that include less commonly represented people, including people of color and multigenerational households
		5. I don't have a lot of control over the curriculum/I don't make modifications
Disciplinary practices (e.g., out of acknowledgment of children's adoption/trauma histories)	89 (43.0%)	1. Using trauma-informed and/or restorative practices
		2. Using a positive reward system
		3. Practicing tolerance and empathy
		4. Working closely with school supports, counselors
Something else	12 (5.8%)	1. Using own story of adoption to make a connection with students
		2. Reaching out to families in advance of possibly tricky assignments so they can share relevant information
None/no modifications	26 (12.6%)	

"The issue with modifying assignments is that it only underscores the ways in which the child's experience is different than the expected "norm." There is no reason to have any assignment that requires modification. All assignments should be created and delivered in ways that honor and lift up everyone, not require modification in order to fit what is perceived to be the "normal" lens."

What types of assignments or activities are challenging for adopted children? Teachers were asked about what types of interactions, activities, or assignments, if any, tended to be especially tricky for adopted children, in their experience. Consistent with the table above, many teachers discussed family tree, family history, and family heritage assignments, as well as bringing in baby photos, and discussion of traits/DNA/genes vs. environment/physical resemblances to family members (e.g., in biology or health classes).

In addition, teachers identified a variety of other topics as potentially challenging for adopted students, including discussions of immigration and personal identity, discussions about family that involve personal sharing (e.g., traditions, culture), and highly visible family-focused events (e.g., Mother's Day/Father's Day; school plays and other events "where families are invited to watch their children"). Assignments or discussions that involve reflecting on early childhood memories, and/or discussing loss/grief, were also described as potentially tricky. Assignments involving how children got their name, "choices parents made as a baby (e.g., names, traditions)" and reproduction/pregnancy were also mentioned as having presented challenges for adopted students.