

# Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists

Experienced therapists who have a working understanding of loss, attachment, trauma, brain development, and adoption-related issues are best suited to help address the challenges that adoptive families experience. Challenges associated with adoption that families may encounter include maintaining contact with families of origin, supporting children whose cultural background differs from their adoptive parents, searching for birth relatives, parenting children who have experienced trauma, supporting children with attachment difficulties, addressing mental health challenges, and more. Therapists trained to address these specific adoption-related challenges are called adoption-competent therapists.

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Adoption-competent therapists understand that the issues a family is facing may be related to the separation, loss, and grief a young person experienced before adoption and that issues may be made worse when parents don't have therapeutic parenting strategies. They can help these children heal within the context of new family relationships and equip parents with the skills to support young people who come from traumatic beginnings. They also often prioritize the importance of including parents, and possibly other family members, in the treatment process. This factsheet includes information about different types of therapy; advice for identifying, interviewing, and working with therapists; and information about insurance and financial support.

## **Therapy as Part of Adoption Support and Preservation Services**

Adoptive families and adoption professionals should recognize that children and families need different kinds of support over time. Like all families, adoptive families may seek therapy more than once as the needs of their children change. Before adoption, during different developmental stages, and throughout life events—such as graduating from school, starting at a new school, getting married, or experiencing a death in the family—therapists can help young people and their families make sense of their feelings and develop strategies for overcoming challenges.

Therapy can help support and preserve permanency throughout a family's adoption journey. Parents are encouraged to use this support as much as needed to help manage the issues common to adoption as well as the more complex challenges associated with young people who may have experienced abuse or neglect. Therapy can help you explain adoption to your preschooler, address the needs of a child who has experienced early childhood abuse and trauma, support your adopted teen's search for identity, or provide guidance if your child decides to search for and reunite with his or her family of origin. In addition to therapy, other adoption support and preservation services may include educational seminars, webinars, and support groups for parents, children, and older youth.

Accessing a range of supports and services will help nurture healthy child and family development. For more information about support and how to find it, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services](#).

## **APPROACHES TO THERAPY**

Working with a therapist is an opportunity to receive help at different stages in a young person's life and a family's development. Families may reach out for help in response to signs of difficulty or to proactively gain tools to navigate the common challenges that accompany adoption. Either way, seeking out therapy shows strength and gives your family the best chance of working through difficult issues effectively and together.

Adoption-competent therapists are specifically trained to provide therapy through the lens of adoption. This means they have the skills and knowledge to help your child and family address unique adoption-specific challenges that other therapists might not be as equipped to handle. The following principles are among those identified by the [National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative](#) (NTI) as key principles of adoption-competent mental health:

- Strengthening attachment
- Supporting grief and loss
- Understanding the impact of trauma on brain development and behavior
- Promoting positive identity development

Adoption-competent therapists may use a variety of different approaches to therapy. Before starting therapy, the therapist may ask you to complete an assessment to understand your family's unique situation, identify goals, and determine a personalized course of treatment. Assessments may be designed as questionnaires or involve conversation or observation. Therapy sessions may include traditional talk therapy as well as other experiential strategies and tools, such as play therapy. Below are descriptions of common therapy approaches, including links with more information:

- **[Family therapy](#)**. This therapy tries to balance the needs of the individual and those of the family. The therapist uses sessions to build attachment relationships and improve communication between parents and their children.
- **[Group therapy](#)**. This therapy allows a small group of clients with similar issues to discuss them together in an organized way.
- **[Play therapy](#)**. Therapists usually use this form of therapy with very young children, who may not be able to express their feelings and fears verbally.
- **[Cognitive behavioral therapy](#)**. This therapy is focused on looking internally at how your thoughts affect your actions. It is typically time limited, problem-solving, and focused on the present. [Alternatives for Families - A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy](#) is a specific treatment commonly used among families involved with child welfare.
- **[Trauma-informed therapy](#)**. Trauma-informed therapy acknowledges the impact that trauma has on children and recognizes that even an infant who experienced trauma may display behaviors related to that trauma at an older age. In other words, a child who isn't old enough to "remember" a traumatic event may still experience the effect. Trauma-informed therapies, such as [eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy](#), focus on specific ways to help process traumatic memories and experiences so they become tolerable.
- **[Attachment-based therapy](#)**. Attachment-based therapies, such as [child-parent psychotherapy](#) and [dyadic developmental psychotherapy](#), focus on building a secure emotional attachment between a young person and a parent.

## A Word About Attachment

Because of the effect of abuse and neglect on the developing brain, children involved with child welfare may struggle to adjust to safe environments and lead healthy, positive lives. Experiences with maltreatment can negatively affect [brain development](#) and, consequently, a young person's emotional, social, and behavioral functioning. This can disrupt the ability to form healthy attachments, which allow children to learn to trust and form meaningful relationships throughout their lives.

Children may experience [attachment challenges and disorders](#) that range from difficulties relating to others to severe social-functioning disorders. Working with a therapist can help parents build and foster secure attachments and cope with the behaviors that may result from earlier attachment disruptions. More information is available on the [Association for Training on Trauma and Attachment in Children website](#).

In recent years, virtual therapy (sessions that take place via a phone or video call) has become increasingly popular. This may be a good option for families who face challenges accessing or traveling to in-person sessions. However, it's important to recognize that there are pros and cons of virtual therapy. For example, while it saves families the time of traveling to appointments, virtual sessions may make it more difficult for a therapist to read a young person's body language and form a connection. Virtual therapy may also not be effective with young children or for therapies that rely on in-person experiences and interactions. Weigh the pros and cons of your options to choose the right fit for you and your family.

## Situations and Treatments to Avoid

Treatments such as "holding therapy," "rebirthing therapy," or other types of treatment that involve restraining the young person or unwelcome or disrespectful intrusion into his or her physical space have raised serious concerns among parents and professionals. Some States have written statutes or policies that restrict or prohibit the use of these therapies with children in the care or custody of a public agency or adopted from it.

## FINDING THE RIGHT THERAPIST

It's important to find an adoption-competent therapist who can address your family's needs. Finding the right therapist means searching for a professional who has adoption-related experience and, if possible, has been trained in adoption competency.

**Identifying prospective therapists.** When seeking out a therapist, look for someone who is trained in working with adoptive families, has experience working with children and families, and has knowledge about the resources and supports available for adoption-related challenges. An effective adoption-competent therapist should also be knowledgeable about the following issues:

- The psychological impact of adoption on children and families
- Loss as a core issue in adoption and how young people process loss at different stages of development
- The impact of trauma on children and families, as the most serious problems may result from traumatic experiences that occurred before adoption
- The role and impact of attachment

### Talking to Your Child About Therapy

Talking to your child about therapy in an age-appropriate manner can help him or her understand what therapy is and why he or she is going. Before starting therapy, choose a time when you can talk to your child about it so you can set expectations and answer questions. Approach the topic calmly and positively. Focus on the ways that therapy will benefit the whole family and emphasize that it is a normal thing a lot of people do to work through challenges. You should not bring up therapy during an argument or as a punishment.

For younger children, you can likely keep things simple and let them know they are going somewhere to play and talk about their feelings. Be cautious of the language and tone you use. Children may become worried that they are sick if you say they are visiting a "doctor," or they may fear that they are in trouble. For older youth who likely already know what therapy is, conversations may be more focused on developing buy-in. Talk to them about why you think it would be beneficial for them to talk to a therapist and focus on your desire to help. Give them plenty of notice and set clear expectations before the initial session. If appropriate, you can invite your child to help choose a therapist or type of therapy.

To find a therapist, you can contact community adoption support networks, ask your placement agency for referrals, or search online. Many public and private adoption agencies and adoptive parent support groups provide lists of therapists who have been trained in adoption issues or who have effectively worked with children in foster care and adoption. Some adoption agencies and permanency support service agencies may have trained therapists on their staff.

You can also check the following resources for therapist recommendations:

- The Center for Adoption Support and Education's [National Directory of Adoption Competent Professionals](#)
- Child Welfare Information Gateway's [National Foster Care and Adoption Directory Search](#) for lists of public and private agencies, support groups, and service organizations
- Psychology Today's [directory of adoption therapists](#)

**Interviewing prospective therapists.** It can be helpful to call prospective therapists or schedule an initial interview to gather basic information. Interviews should start with a brief description of the concern or problem for which you and your family need help. The following are some questions to discuss:

- Do you prefer to work with the entire family or only with children?
- What is your experience with adoption and adoption issues? How many adoptive families have you worked with? Have you worked with families with similar issues to the ones my family is facing?
- How long have you been in practice, and what degrees, licenses, or certifications do you have?
- Have you taken any courses or trainings in adoption competency?
- What approaches to therapy do you use? (See the Approaches to Therapy section.)
- What changes in the daily life of our child and family might we see as a result of the therapy?
- Do you give parents regular reports on their child's progress?
- Can you estimate a time frame for the duration of the sessions?
- Do you work with teachers, juvenile justice personnel, daycare providers, and other adults in the young person's life, when appropriate?

The person or team best suited to work with your family will depend on your family's specific issues, as well as the professional's training, credentials, and experience with adoptive families. Matching with a therapist may take time, and it's normal to meet with several therapists before you find the right fit. You can empower your child to be involved in the selection process by asking what he or she likes and dislikes about prospective therapists. Older youth may even be interested in choosing a type of therapy or identifying therapists. If your child comes from a different racial or cultural background from your own, he or she may prefer to work with a therapist who looks similar or shares a similar background.

## WORKING WITH A THERAPIST

Your involvement in and support of your child's therapy is critical to a positive outcome. Be prepared to be actively involved in therapy, including in family or individual sessions. It's important to keep scheduled appointments and commit to the full course of treatment. Children whose lives have been affected by significant losses and traumas may require more extensive sessions or longer periods of treatment.

Regular check-ins with your child and the therapist can help you identify progress and ongoing concerns. What is working is just as important as what is not working. You may want to request an evaluation meeting with the therapist 6 to 8 weeks after treatment begins and regular updates after that. Evaluation meetings will help everyone involved assess the progress of treatment and offer the opportunity to discuss the following:

- Satisfaction with the working relationship between the therapist, young person, and family members
- Progress toward mutually agreed-upon goals for treatment approaches and desired outcomes
- Progress on problems that first prompted the request for treatment
- The therapist's diagnosis and ongoing treatment recommendations (usually necessary for insurance reimbursement)
- The therapist's evaluation of whether therapy can improve the situation that prompted treatment

As you talk to your therapist about progress, remember that progress looks different for different families and may not always happen in a straight line. For example, children with attachment trauma may respond with inconsistent or chaotic behaviors when forming stronger attachments to their caregiver because of the inherent fear of the caregiver abandoning them. It's good to remember that an increase in "negative" behavior does not necessarily equal regression or a lack of progress.

In situations where a young person is seeing a therapist individually, there may be confidentiality laws in place that prohibit the therapist from disclosing certain medical information. Often for minors, a therapist can share information about treatment, symptoms, and progress with a caregiver, but he or she [cannot share therapy session notes](#). Regardless of laws, it's important to respect children's privacy. They may be more open to therapy if they know they can privately confide in someone other than a parent or family.

Ongoing evaluation also involves assessing your and your child's relationship with the therapist. Even when the match with a therapist seems to be good initially, the relationship with the family or the results may change or become unsatisfactory over time. You should consider seeking a second opinion and possibly changing therapists if the therapy does not appear to be progressing as expected. Discussing a change with the therapist may provide an opportunity to hear his or her

perspective on your child's progress and suggestions for alternatives. If you do change therapists, be sure to help your child understand the reasons for changing and to [model healthy closure](#). Trust your thoughts and feelings since you know your child best. You should give your child a voice on the matter and regularly ask for his or her opinion on therapy sessions.

## Funding for Therapy

The cost of therapy varies and may be covered in part by health insurance or the young person's [adoption assistance](#) agreement. Many States have extensive services to support and preserve permanency that include comprehensive assessment, therapy, case management, support groups, and other services that are free to adoptive and subsidized guardianship families. Some States may limit services to those adopted from the State foster care system.

Some therapists, and most community mental health centers, provide services on a sliding-scale fee based on income. Ask about costs and when payment is due (after each session or after reimbursement by insurance).

Insurance companies have varying requirements for coverage of mental health treatment. You may have to choose from a list of approved or in-network therapists, and there may be a specified time frame or a limit on the number and types of sessions covered. You should ask the insurance company for the following information:

- The extent of coverage for mental health treatment (including whether it's covered and, if so, the time frames and limits on the sessions)
- Specialty areas of approved (in-network) providers
- Company policies regarding payment for treatment provided by therapists outside the plan or network
- Whether insurance will pay for an out-of-plan adoption-competent therapist if such a therapist is not available within the network

If your child has an adoption assistance agreement, you can check to see what the subsidy covers on the [Families Rising website](#) (formerly known as the North American Council on Adoptable Children).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[AdoptUSKids](#). Provides free information and resources to adoptive families

[American Psychological Association](#). Works to benefit society and improve people's lives by creating, communicating, and applying psychological knowledge

[Center for Adoption Support and Education](#). Provides adoption-competent education, resources, and support services, including mental health services, for foster and adoptive families

[Families Rising \(formerly North American Council on Adoptable Children\)](#). Works to ensure that all children in foster care have permanent, loving families and that adoptive families have the support they need

[National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative](#). Offers free, web-based training on addressing the mental health and developmental needs of children in foster, adoptive, or kinship families

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#). Provides information on types of trauma, parenting, and treatments

## CONCLUSION

Many adoptive families have issues or concerns at different points in their lives that may affect their emotional well-being. Adoption-competent therapists, who understand adoption issues and adoptive families, are best suited to provide therapies based on the needs of the young person and family. Finding the right therapist and managing the right therapy for your child takes effort and commitment. No one knows your child like you do. Successful therapy depends on your and your child's active role in engaging the right therapist, committing to the process, and being a part of the treatment.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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