



Adoptive Families  
Association of BC



# School and adoption

## Navigating the education system

## **School and adoption: Navigating the education system**

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The Adoptive Families Association of BC is a charitable, accredited, non-profit organization offering adoption support, information, and education. Find out more about AFABC at [bcadopt.com](https://bcadopt.com).

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# Supports from AFABC

## BURSARIES

AFABC is proud to offer two bursaries for youth that assist in covering costs of tuition and/or costs directly related to post-secondary programs. Learn more about them at [bcadoption.com/bursary](https://bcadoption.com/bursary).

**The Howard Legacy Youth Fund** was established with a donation from Peggy Howard in 2012 and is made available to applicants who are current or former youth in government (foster) care.

**AFABC Youth Bursary**, established in 2014, accepts applications from youth who have joined their family by legal adoption or other forms of permanency.

## ON-DEMAND WEBINARS

AFABC has over 20 adoption-related webinars online. We offer two on-demand webinars related to adoption and school, watch them online at [bcadoption.com/demand-webinars](https://bcadoption.com/demand-webinars).

**School Issues and Adoption** is focused on why school can be a challenging environment for children who have joined their family by adoption.

**Adoption and Classroom Success** focuses on why an adopted child's previous life experiences can cause them to experience school—and life—through a different framework.

## CONNECT WITH US

You can find us on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as through our website! We also have nine active Facebook Support Groups, where you can connect with other members of our community to help you along with every step in your adoption journey.

### FACEBOOK SUPPORT GROUPS *Search on Facebook or click the links here!*

- All Ages Adoptive Parents
- Waiting Parents Group
- Single Adoptive Parent Support
- Adoptive Parents of Indigenous Children
- FASD Parent Support
- Transracial and Intercountry Adoptive Parents
- Adoptive Parents of Teens
- LGBTQ - Adoptive Parents Support Network - BC
- Families Raising Family in BC

## FIND US ONLINE



@bcadopt



[bcadoption.com](https://bcadoption.com)



[info@bcadoption.com](mailto:info@bcadoption.com)



## FAMILY SUPPORT WORKERS

Our team of Family Support Workers are experienced adoptive parents, and they're here to support you!

Our Family Support Workers provide free community-based one-to-one support, workshops, and family events to adoptive and waiting parents as well as to people considering adoption.

Find the Family Support Worker in your region online at: [bcadoption.com/familysupport](https://bcadoption.com/familysupport)





# Did you know?



**87%**

of BC's adoptable  
children and youth  
are school-aged

**639**

children waiting  
for adoption are  
school-aged

*\*Source: Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) 2019/2020 numbers.*

**12%**

of people considering  
adoption want a child  
between the ages of  
6 to 12

**4%**

of people considering  
adoption want a child  
aged 13 and up

*\*Source: 2017 Canadian adoption survey, Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.*

“**Consider [adopting] older children.  
They can have baggage, but  
they also have resilience and  
unbelievable strength.**

**—An adoptive family**



# SCHOOL 101: FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

School can present challenges for adoptive parents and their children. This brief guide will help prepare you for the school experience and, hopefully, prevent some common problems.

## PREPARING FOR SCHOOL

**1.** If you're not familiar with the school that your child will attend, ask if you can sit in on a school assembly. This is a good way to get a feel for the school's diversity. Talk to the principal about how the school approaches the subject of different kinds of families.

**2.** Attend a Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting. PAC meetings are a great place to promote awareness of the adoption and permanency community, and encourage adoption sensitivity.

**3.** Make an appointment to meet with your child's teacher in September. It may be wise to explain that your child is adopted, and to ask them to be sensitive with assignments about families or the child's history.

**4.** If you decide to explain that your child was adopted, share only relevant information. In most cases, you can explain your child's needs without providing all the background details.

**5.** Encourage principals, counsellors, and teachers to use positive adoption language. Give them a copy of the adoption language page in this guide (pg. 11).

**6.** Donate a book about adoption to your school's library. Suggest other adoption-related titles for the librarian to include in the next order of new books.

**7.** With the permission of your child, make a presentation about adoption to your child's class or to teachers at a faculty meeting. An AFABC Family Support Worker can help you with this. Contact us for more information: 604-320-7330 or [info@bcadoption.com](mailto:info@bcadoption.com).

**8.** Keep an eye out for other adoptive families in the school. Your children may make friends with other adoptees and you will have other adoptive parents to share ideas and solve problems with.

## NEWLY ADOPTED KIDS

**1.** If you think your child needs to spend more time attaching to you, or is immature for their age, consider delaying entry to Kindergarten or skip it altogether—kids don't have to attend until Grade 1.

**2.** Take your child to the school before the first day to look around and meet the teacher. This is especially important for children who have had lots of disruption in their lives and who find change and transitions hard.

**3.** Be realistic about your child's abilities. Interruptions in attachment, early deprivations, cultural differences, and multiple moves can cause a child to act younger than they are. Your child may not be able to learn as fast other classmates.

**4.** If your child has a history of attachment difficulties, grief and loss, abuse, or other trauma, make sure that the school counsellor and teacher are aware and that they have information on how it impacts your child.

**5.** If your child has Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), make sure that their teachers are familiar with FASD. If they are not, they may assume that your child is misbehaving when in fact they may be struggling because of FASD.

**6.** If you think your child needs services not normally provided in the regular classroom, you need to advocate for them. Do your research about provincial and district policies so you know your rights and options.

**7.** Most students with special needs are entitled to an Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEPs document goals, adaptations, modifications, services, and achievement measures geared to your child's needs and strengths.

**8.** If your child has special needs or designations that have already been identified, bring all available medical records, psychoeducational assessments, and IEPs to the school when you register. Ask at the school office if you need to do anything to make sure the information gets to the right people.

## INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

**1.** When you register your child at school, bring along your child's birth certificate (if you have one), and any immigration documents such as a citizenship card.

**2.** Be prepared to advocate to get the best services for your child. Teachers and other school staff are often unaware of the needs of internationally adopted children.

**3.** Remember that it's unrealistic to expect older adopted children to develop proficient English language skills within one or two years of adoption and moving to Canada.

**4.** Provide school staff with information on the effects of orphanage life/institutional care on learning and development.

**5.** In many cases, the child will be developmentally behind children of the same age. Beyond being an English language learner (ELL), a recently adopted international adoptee may be adapting to cultural changes, grieving their former life, friends, caregivers, and attaching to their new families.

**6.** Though the school may want your child to join a grade consistent with their age, if that doesn't seem right, you can insist they are put in a lower grade.

**7.** Don't rush your older child straight into school—especially if he or she doesn't speak English. Allow your child to get used to the new home, community, and family. This will also help your child gain some basic English speaking skills.

**8.** Most schools have ELL classes and Language Support Programs for students who are more advanced in their English language learning. High schools have learning resource centres which children can attend to get help with their work.

### DID YOU KNOW?

In some cases, international adoptees are assigned a younger birth age by the orphanage or care home because their birth date is unknown or to make the child "more adoptable."

Adoptees who are older than their assigned age may fare better in a higher grade, among students who are closer to their true age.

An AFABC Family Support Worker can help if you suspect your child's age and birthdate are not accurate.

Find the Family Support Worker in your region online at: [bcadoption.com/familysupport](https://bcadoption.com/familysupport).



# ADOPTION 101: FOR TEACHERS

Each year approximately **250-300 children and youth** find a permanent family through the Adopt BC Kids program, facilitated by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). This information sheet is intended to help teachers understand issues adoptees face at school and how they can help the adopted children in their class.

## BE ADOPTION SENSITIVE

In addition to adopted kids, your classroom may also include foster children, or kids who are living permanently with extended family members, friends, or other caregivers. These tips can help create a supportive classroom environment for them as well.

**1.** Other children may make unintentionally hurtful remarks about the child's family and origins. Watch for opportunities to support the child and gently correct the other students.

**2.** It's common for adoptees to be asked about their "real" (birth) family, or to be told their adoptive parents aren't their "real" parents. Sometimes they're even asked how much money their parents paid for them.

**3.** Some children know very little, or nothing, about their birth parents. This can cause them distress and great feelings of loss. Of course, this is not always the case. Open adoptions are the norm now, and many children have very positive contact with birth family and are happy to talk about them. Let the adoptee take the lead on if and how they talk about their birth family.

**4.** Sadly, some children experience abuse, neglect, or other traumatic events before being adopted. They may also have lived in several different homes. Explaining their family or birth history may be painful and challenging.



## EASY WAYS TO HELP

You can create a safe and supportive environment for adoptees in your class by doing some very simple things:

**1.** Set an accepting, positive tone. Calm, thoughtful comments or responses to questions about adoption send the message that adoption is a normal way to bring families together. When you have an accepting attitude toward adoption, it will go a long way toward nurturing that in the children in your class.

**2.** Teach the children that adoptive families are just one of many family models (e.g. blended, step, single-parent, same-sex, foster) and that all the people in their lives are real.

**3.** Children should be in control of their adoption story. Take their lead about what they choose to share. Try to answer questions about adoption in a general way so that the other children learn not to intrude on fellow students' privacy.

**4.** Have age-appropriate, adoption-themed books in classrooms. See our resource guide (pg. 10) for ideas!

**5.** Normalize adoption by including adoptive families whenever you talk about families in general. Tell children about famous adoptees. To name a few: Superman, Dave Thomas (founder of Wendy's), Simone Biles (USA Olympian), and Colin Kaepernick (NFL player).



## A SPECIAL CUT-OUT TO SHARE WITH YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER

### WHAT IS ADOPTION

Adoption is a legal and social process whereby an adult person becomes the parent of a child. Once a child is legally adopted, they are same as any birth child in terms of the law and parental responsibility to the child.

### ADOPTION IN BC

There are a few main routes to adoption in BC:

1. Only a small number of children are adopted as infants in BC. Most children waiting for adoption are school-aged (ages 4-18).
2. Each year, 250-300 children join families from the BC foster care system, and around 50 are adopted from other countries.
3. Children are adopted by step-parents, relatives or family friends, and foster parents, or join families through other forms of permanency, such as legal guardianship and kinship adoption.

### WHO CAN ADOPT A CHILD IN BC?

To adopt a child, you must be over 19 and a resident of BC. You can be single or partnered. You don't need a particular education, language, culture, religion, or type of home. You do have to have the ability to commit to and love a child.

### HOW ADOPTION HAS CHANGED

Adoption has changed a great deal over the last 20 or 30 years. Secrecy is a thing of the past, and many adoptive families have contact with their child's birth parents and birth families. This is called openness.

An open relationship with birth family can range from a regular exchange of cards, photos or gifts, to more frequent get-togethers. Openness is usually a good thing for everyone—it means more people to love and be loved by, and it helps children understand themselves and their story.

### ADOPTION AND SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS

School assignments that address genetics, inherited characteristics, human development, or family heritage can be difficult for adoptees. Here are a few ways to adapt lesson plans to be more inclusive of adoptees.

1. If you are planning a family tree assignment, give the children options such as including all the people in their lives who love them, rather than just relatives.
2. Some adopted children don't have pictures of themselves as babies or infants. Asking them to produce a photo for an assignment can be upsetting. Plan to teach about topics such as family and identity in ways that include adoptive families—and all other types of families, too!
3. Invite an adoptive parent, an adult adoptee, or an adoption expert to speak to the class. The Adoptive Families Association of BC can arrange a speaker in most communities. Call us at 604-320-7330 or send us an email at [info@bcadoption.com](mailto:info@bcadoption.com).
4. Celebrate Adoption Awareness Month in November to bring awareness to the adoption and permanency community. Visit [bcadoption.com/AAM](http://bcadoption.com/AAM).
5. Consider adapting your permission slips, school forms, etc. to reflect all the diverse families in your class. Retire the terms "mother and father" in favour of "parent(s)/guardian(s)".

# Dear teacher and school counsellor

The late Brenda McCreight, parent, author, and renowned therapist, wrote this letter for parents to give to teachers. Use it as a starting point to write your own letter to your child's teacher.

## DEAR TEACHER AND SCHOOL COUNSELLOR,

As you know, we are an adoptive family. Our child joined us after going through many difficult life experiences. As a result, she has some different challenges than other children you have taught, and we have to use some parenting techniques that you may not be used to. For example, you may find that we are less flexible about boundaries than you think is reasonable. We do not let our child share food, toys, or clothes at school the way the other kids do. This is because our child has never really owned anything of her own and so doesn't yet understand that we will provide everything that is needed (and more). She is still giving things away and taking things that she shouldn't.

On the other hand, you may find that we are more lenient than you think we should be. For example, we don't get upset when our child steals. That is because we know that it will take time for her to learn some of the basic rules of society that other children take for granted.

You may also find that our child turns to you for comfort and tells you about the problems she is experiencing at home. I am glad you feel that you can offer emotional support, but please remember she has not yet learned that parents can provide care and nurturing and it is important that you do not try to take our place. As well, our child may tell you things that are not true, or exaggerate situations and events. This is because she is used to saying things to get attention and has not yet learned that what she says will have an impact on our family.

We are working on these, and many other issues with the help of competent professionals. If you feel that our child's health or safety is in danger, that we are too strict, or that we do not understand our child, please call us directly and we will help you to understand our reasons for parenting the way we do.

Thank you for caring.

## BOOKS TO RECOMMEND TO TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS

### Ages 4-up:

*And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson

*I've Loved You Since Forever* by Hoda Kotb

*How I Was Adopted* by Joanna Cole

### Ages 8-up:

*A Family Is a Family Is a Family* by Sara O'Leary

*Can I tell you about Adoption* by Anne Braff Brodzinsky

### Ages 12-up:

*Adopted Teens Only: A Survival Guide to Adolescence* by Danea Gorbett

*Half a World Away* by Cynthia Kadohata



# Adoption language

Using the right words can be tricky. Here are some tips about positive and respectful adoption language. Different families may have their own preferences, so we encourage you to ask the adoptive family in your life how they like to phrase things!

## **Instead of this...**

My own child, my natural child  
Real parents, natural parents  
Gave up, gave away  
Keeping her baby  
My adopted child  
Foreign adoption  
Is adopted  
Foster kid

## **Say this...**

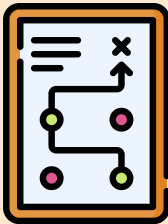
Biological child  
Birth parents/first parent  
Make an adoption plan  
Parenting her child  
My child  
International adoption  
Was adopted  
Adopted with care experience

# 10 tips for IEP season

The back to school routine is busy enough and the last thing families need is added stress about IEP meetings. Here are 10 tips to help you go in with a positive attitude, a collaborative mindset, and a plan of action.

## 1 HAVE AN INTERIM PLAN

Don't wait for the school to contact you. Send a short email or arrange a brief meeting with your child's teacher and/or education assistant (EA). Give them some coping strategies for your child to get through that first month with the least amount of stress and disruption for both your child and the class (fidgets, break ideas, behaviours to watch for, strategies to re-route, sensory aides, etc.). Mention the IEP meeting at this point and let them know you understand what that is and are looking forward to it.



## 2 PREPARE YOURSELF FOR THE MEETING



It can be emotionally draining to talk about your child's challenges. Set out your ideas on paper beforehand. What are your child's strengths, challenges, and goals? Read through your child's last IEP/report card to refresh your memory about what goals and challenges your child has been tackling recently. Be realistic about the school's ability and your child's ability. Get ready to be part of a team approach. You all want what's best for your child and the school. On the day of the meeting, do some self-care. Try deep breaths, a favourite snack, a walk, or a relaxing bath.

## 3 VALUE THE SCHOOL'S TIME AND THE STAFF'S WORK



Schools are busy places and it's likely that your child is not the only one who will need an IEP. Email to confirm who will be at the meeting, including the principal if you want them there. Bring a friend or advocate—sometimes there is a lot of information to process and you may need notes taken. If you are an English language learner (ELL), insist on the school having an interpreter for you. Does your child have a community key worker or behaviour interventionist? You can invite this person to come and support you in this meeting. They may be able to offer the school insight on what has worked for your child in the past.

## 4 GET TO KNOW THE LEARNING SUPPORT SERVICES (LSS) TEACHER



How active are they in the classroom? Do they interact directly with your child or do they oversee the teacher or support staff? Do they know about the role of key workers? Have they connected with the Provincial Outreach Programs (POPs) related to your child's diagnosis? Do they know of any new research or resources? Can they suggest professional development (PD) day activities for teachers and support staff that specifically include learning more about supporting children with special needs in the classroom setting? Do they offer small support groups for reading or math or building social skills? How are children referred to those groups? Can your child be included in these supports?

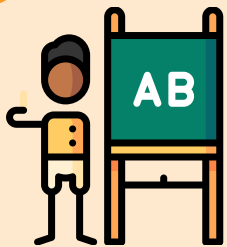
## 5 GET TO KNOW THE EDUCATION ASSISTANT (EA)



Do they have a long-term contract at the school or are they temporary? Find out how you can support and encourage them (flowers, a note, chocolate, etc.).



## 6 GET TO KNOW THE CLASSROOM TEACHER



Know their name, their classroom, how much experience they have with children with similar diagnoses to your child's, and their level of comfort supporting children with special needs. Try to build rapport with, and support the professionals in your school. They are trained for teaching and they want to see your child succeed. Educate them in a warm and positive way. Some parents have had teachers questioning an FASD diagnosis because the child didn't have particular facial features. It would be recommended to gently explain that FASD looks different in each child. You get more bees with honey than vinegar!

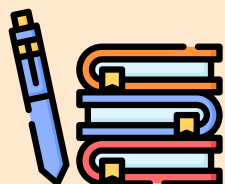


## 7 DECIDE HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE SCHOOL



Clear communication will help to build trust and consistency between home and school. Do you want to use a communication book, email, text, or phone calls? How often do you expect communication? What things do you want communication about? Do you want to know about proud moments from the day or incidents that involved the principal? Make a plan so that you don't get all of one or the other. You want a balanced communication model.

## 8 DECIDE HOW HOMEWORK HAPPENS



Or if it happens at all! Some schools and classrooms are more flexible than others. Some children exert so much energy keeping themselves regulated at school that families may not support doing more schoolwork at home. For these children, it's not realistic. However, if your child consistency ignores instructions or opportunities to finish work during class time, then occasionally doing catch-up work at home could make sense.

## 9 KNOW YOUR CHILD'S DIAGNOSES



And their designations, if applicable—there's a difference! Make sure that the school has copies of any assessments or testing that has been done by professionals or past schools.

This is key in getting your school the funding it needs to adequately support your child. Understand the provincial funding structure and where your child fits within this paradigm. Learn more about special needs funding from the BC government: [bit.ly/K-12Funding](https://bit.ly/K-12Funding).

## 10 FOLLOW UP AND FOLLOW THROUGH

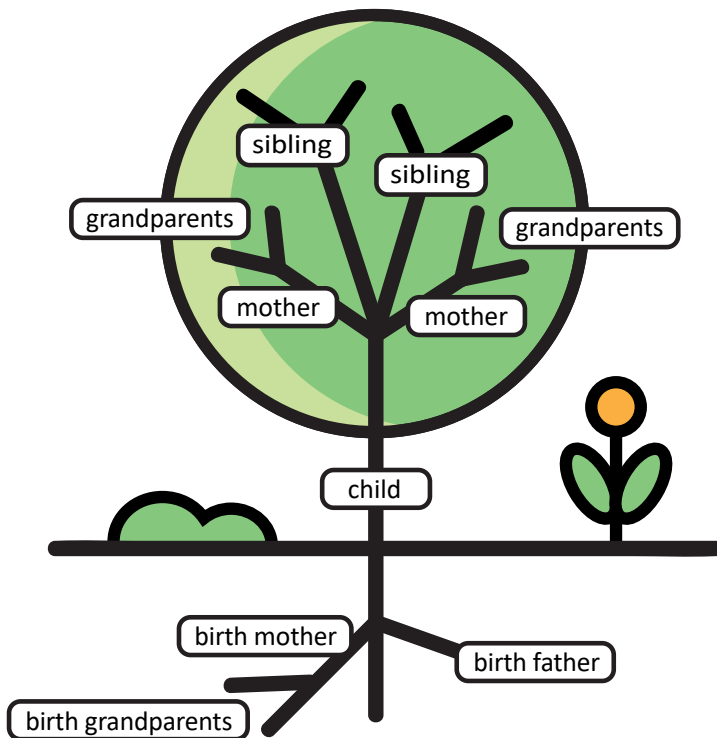


If you say you are going to do something, make sure you follow through. Set up the assessment, make the appointment with the pediatrician, accompany the field trip. Your stability and integrity increase your voice at the school and the school's impression of your family. Don't over-promise or over-commit. Know your own limits. Follow up on what they've committed to doing as well. Is the IEP being followed? Have the behaviour interventions been implemented? Don't be afraid to be the squeaky wheel.



# Adoption-friendly family trees

At some point, almost every child will have to tackle a family tree school project. Classic family tree assignments assume every kid comes from an intact biological family with one mom and one dad. This can leave adopted kids feeling confused, left out, and sad. These alternative family trees welcome kids from all families to celebrate their uniqueness. We've filled out each example tree to represent one potential family structure. Infinite variations are possible!

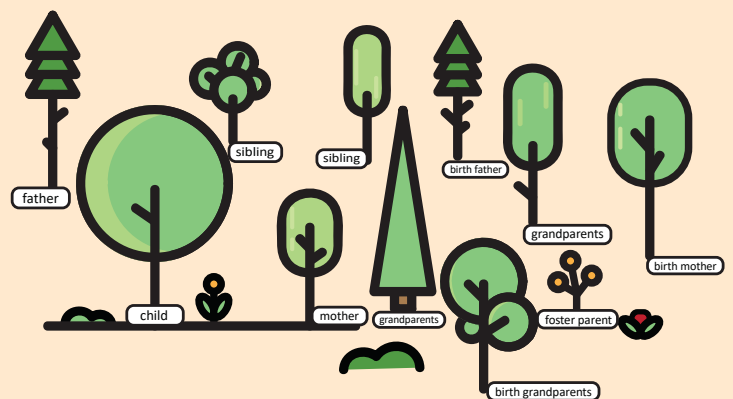


## THE ROOTS AND BRANCHES FAMILY TREE

The Roots and Branches family tree is a great way to accommodate a child's biological and adoptive families. The child's name is written in the space in trunk, or heart, of the tree. The roots represent the biological family, the trunk represents the child, and the branches represent the adoptive family. This format could easily be adjusted so that the branches include foster family, step-family, or any other type of family.

## THE FAMILY FOREST

In the Family Forest, the child's tree is the largest; other trees of various sizes are assigned to family members. This option allows for a lot of creativity! The child can assign their birth family to a specific type or size of tree, and their adoptive family to a different type or size. The level of creativity is up to you!



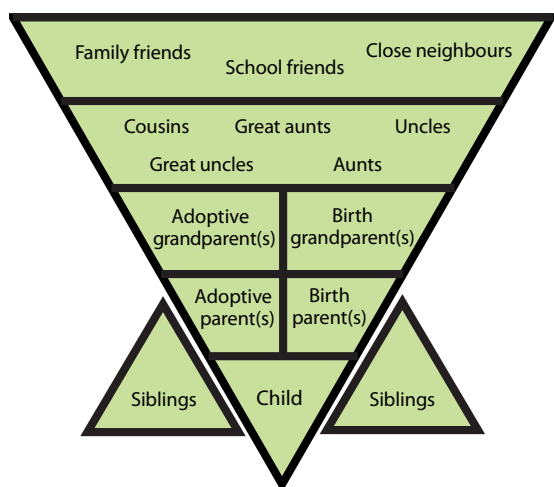
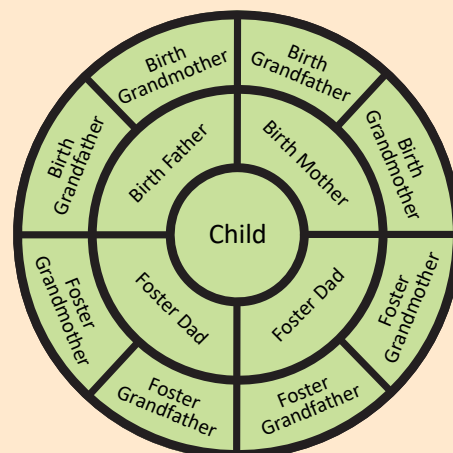


## THE NAME TREE

A Name Tree is a great option for a child who wants to be more private about their adoption or the specifics of their family. The child's name is written at the bottom of the page, and the names of family members are written in the shape of the tree. The child can place anyone they want wherever they want, and they don't need to include titles like aunt, mother, or sister. Instead, they can just use people's names or nicknames. These trees can be especially beautiful pieces of art!

## THE FAMILY WHEEL

The Family Wheel is a simple and inclusive alternative option. This diagram lets children draw as many slices of pie as they need to fit their family. The child's name goes in the centre of the wheel and the middle and outer rings of the wheel represent birth, adoptive, foster and/or step-family relationships.



## THE FAMILY PYRAMID

The Family Pyramid is a simple and adaptable alternative for adopted children. The number of levels in the pyramid is completely up to the child and their family structure. The child's name is placed on the bottom level and the family members are placed in the ones above. The pyramid can be divided in half to include birth family.



# Racism in school

When kids experience racism, what can their parents do? Here are some resources and tips for helping your child cope with racism at school.

## TIPS

- If your child is BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour), you must prepare your child for hurtful and racist comments at school. Make sure your child knows that you are always available to talk to about such incidents. Offer comfort, validate feelings, and help your child understand that no one else can define who they are. Teach your child strategies to deal directly with racist comments.
- When racist situations occur, talk with the principal, teachers, and counsellors. Work out how to handle them and make sure they follow up.
- Other transracial adoptive families have already had to handle racism at school, and they can be a great source of advice. Join our Facebook support group (search for AFABC - Transracial and Intercountry Adoptive Parents), or contact your AFABC Family Support Worker to be matched with a buddy parent.

“How can I help people see how the blatant use of the N-word cuts into my soul? Do you use that word? Do you know it's wrong? Do you know what it means? Do you know how it hurts?”

I fear for my sister going to high school in two years, knowing the racist culture that I've been exposed to.

—An adopted youth



## EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

- Dr. Lisa Gunderson is an award-winning educator and equity consultant and trainer. She does presentations in schools across Canada and the USA: [oneloveconsulting.com](http://oneloveconsulting.com)
- A Child's Song provides consultation, education and therapy to families joined together through adoption. They offer a number of workshops, including one for teachers and other school professionals: [achildsong.ca/workshops-for-school-professionals](http://achildsong.ca/workshops-for-school-professionals)
- Teaching Tolerance is an excellent resource of articles, programs and webinars designed to help teachers and schools educate children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy: [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org)
- Here are a few articles on racism and children:
  - Children are not colorblind: [academia.edu/3094721/Children\\_Are\\_Not\\_Colorblind\\_How\\_Young\\_Children\\_Learn\\_Race](http://academia.edu/3094721/Children_Are_Not_Colorblind_How_Young_Children_Learn_Race)
  - Are Kids Racist? (Not) talking about race with your children: [psychologytoday.com/us/blog/developing-minds/201304/are-kids-racist](http://psychologytoday.com/us/blog/developing-minds/201304/are-kids-racist)
  - Teaching your kids not to “see” race is a terrible idea, studies have found: [qz.com/821200/if-youre-not-talking-about-race-with-your-kid-youre-likely-teaching-her-to-be-racist/](http://qz.com/821200/if-youre-not-talking-about-race-with-your-kid-youre-likely-teaching-her-to-be-racist/)

### NEVER TOO YOUNG

*Children are never too young to start learning about racial difference and the importance of fighting prejudice. Created based on information from the Children's Community School ([childrenscommunityschool.org](http://childrenscommunityschool.org)).*

**0 years:** At birth, babies look equally at faces of all races. At 3 months, babies look more at faces that match the race of their caregivers.

**1 year:** Children as young as 2 years can use race to reason about other people's behaviours.

**2 years:** By 30 months, most children use race to choose playmates.

**3 years:** Expressions of racial prejudice often peak at ages 4 and 5.

**4 years:** By 5, Black and Latinx children in research settings show no preference toward their own groups compared to Whites; White children at this age remain strongly biased in favour of whiteness.

**5 years:** By kindergarten, children show many of the same racial attitudes that adults in our culture hold. They have already learned to associate some groups with higher status than others.

**6 years:** Explicit conversations with 5–7 year olds about interracial friendship can dramatically improve their racial attitudes in as little as a single week.



### RACISM IN THE COMMUNITY OR SCHOOL

It is your child's right to attend school, work, or activities free from discrimination. If they are not, this is a violation of their human rights as set out in the Human Rights Code and in the Ministry of Education's requirements for all schools' codes of conduct.

- This PDF is a great teaching guide on how to create a safe environment in schools: [bit.ly/2PzX39o](http://bit.ly/2PzX39o)

Visit [hatecrimebc.ca](http://hatecrimebc.ca) to learn more about hate crimes, and how to report them.



# Trauma in classrooms

With grief, sadness is obvious. With trauma, the symptoms can go largely unrecognized because it shows up looking like other problems: frustration, acting out, or difficulty concentrating, following directions or working in a group. Often students are misdiagnosed with anxiety, behaviour disorders, or attention disorders, rather than understanding the trauma that's driving those symptoms and reactions.

For children who have experienced trauma, learning can be a big struggle. But once trauma is identified as the root of the behaviour, we can adapt our approach to help kids cope when they're at school. Detroit-based clinical director of the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, a program of the Starr Global Learning Network, Caelan Kuban Soma offers these tips for understanding kids who have been through trauma, plus strategies for helping them.

## **KIDS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA AREN'T TRYING TO PUSH YOUR BUTTONS**

If a child is having trouble with transitions or turning in a folder at the beginning of the day, remember that children may be distracted because of a situation at home that is causing them to worry. Instead of reprimanding children for being late or forgetting homework, be affirming and accommodating by establishing a visual cue or verbal

This article originally appeared on WeAreTeachers, and was sponsored by The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC). Read the entire blog series on childhood trauma at [weareteachers.com/tag/childhood-trauma/](https://weareteachers.com/tag/childhood-trauma/). TLC provides services to traumatized children and their families and strives to give school professionals, crisis intervention teams, medical and mental health professionals, and childcare professionals the training and resources needed to help these children and their families thrive.

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reminder to help that child. “Switch your mind-set and remember the kid who has experienced trauma is not trying to push your buttons,” says Soma.

### **KIDS WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH TRAUMA WORRY ABOUT WHAT’S GOING TO HAPPEN NEXT**

A daily routine in the classroom can be calming, so try to provide structure and predictability whenever possible. Since words may not sink in for children who go through trauma, they need other sensory cues, says Soma. Besides explaining how the day will unfold, have signs or a storyboard that shows which activity—math, reading, lunch, recess, etc.—the class will do when.

### **EVEN IF THE SITUATION DOESN’T SEEM THAT BAD TO YOU, IT’S HOW THE CHILD FEELS THAT MATTERS**

Try not to judge the trauma. As caring teachers, we may unintentionally project that a situation isn’t really that bad, but how the child feels about the stress is what matters most. “We have to remember it’s the perception of the child... the situation is something they have no control over, feeling that their life or safety is at risk,” says Soma. It may not even be just one event, but the culmination of chronic stress—for example, a child who lives in poverty may worry about the family being able to pay rent on time, keep their jobs, or have enough food. Those ongoing stressors can cause trauma. “Anything that keeps our nervous system activated for longer than four to six weeks is defined as post-traumatic stress,” says Soma.

### **TRAUMA ISN’T ALWAYS ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENCE**

Trauma is often associated with violence, but kids also can suffer trauma from a variety of situations—like divorce, a move, or being over-scheduled or bullied. “All kids, especially in this



day and age, experience extreme stress from time to time,” says Soma. “It is more common than we think.”

### **YOU DON’T NEED TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT CAUSED THE TRAUMA TO BE ABLE TO HELP**

Instead of focusing on the specifics of a traumatic situation, concentrate on the support you can give children who are suffering. “Stick with what you are seeing now—the hurt, the anger, the worry,” Soma says, rather than getting every detail of the child’s story. Privacy is a big issue in working with students suffering from trauma, and schools often have a confidentiality protocol that teachers follow. You don’t have to dig deep into the trauma to be able to effectively respond with empathy and flexibility.

Kids who experience trauma need to feel they’re good at something and can influence the world.

Find opportunities that allow kids to set and achieve goals, and they’ll feel a sense of mastery and control, suggests Soma. Assign them jobs in the classroom that they can do well or let them be a peer helper to someone else. “It is very empowering,” says Soma.

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“Set them up to succeed and keep that bar in the zone where you know they are able to accomplish it and move forward.” Rather than saying a student is good at math, find experiences to let him or her feel it. Because trauma is such a sensory experience, kids need more than encouragement—they need to feel their worth through concrete tasks.

### **THERE'S A DIRECT CONNECTION BETWEEN STRESS AND LEARNING**

When kids are stressed, it's tough for them to learn. Create a safe, accepting environment in your classroom by letting children know you understand their situation and support them. “Kids who have experienced trauma have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported,” says Soma. “The more the teacher can do to make the child less anxious and have the child focus on the task at hand, the better the performance you are going to see out of that child. There is a direct connection between lowering stress and academic outcomes.”

### **SELF-REGULATION CAN BE A CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS SUFFERING FROM TRAUMA**

Some kids with trauma are growing up with emotionally unavailable parents and haven't learned

to self-soothe, so they may develop distracting behaviours and have trouble staying focused for long periods. To help them cope, schedule regular brain breaks. Tell the class at the beginning of the day when there will be breaks—for free time, to play a game or to stretch. “If you build it in before the behaviour gets out of whack, you set the child up for success,” says Soma. A child may be able to make it through a 20-minute block of work if it's understood there will be a break to recharge before the next task.

### **IT'S OK TO ASK KIDS WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP THEM MAKE IT THROUGH THE DAY**

For all students with trauma, you can ask them directly what you can do to help. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes. Soma says, “We have to step back and ask them, ‘How can I help? Is there something I can do to make you feel even a little bit better?’”

### **YOU CAN SUPPORT KIDS WITH TRAUMA EVEN WHEN THEY'RE OUTSIDE YOUR CLASS**

Loop in the larger school. Share trauma-informed strategies with all staff, from bus drivers to parent volunteers to crossing guards. Remind everyone: “The child is not his or her behaviour,” says Soma. “Typically there is something underneath that driving that to happen, so be sensitive. Ask yourself, ‘I wonder what's going on with that kid?’ rather than saying, ‘What's wrong with the kid?’ That's a huge shift in the way we view kids.”

“For all students with trauma, you can ask them directly what you can do to help. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes.”









# Effective advocacy

Advocating for your child's needs at school is a key part of an adoptive parent's "job description." In this article, teacher and parent Alison Wagler shares her tips on how to work with the school as an ally, not an adversary.

## **SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE**

One Halloween at the school where I teach, a parent kindly offered to bring in a smoke machine to make the Halloween party more exciting. The party became exciting indeed when the smoke set off the fire alarm, sending 400 kids in costumes out into the rain for an unplanned fire drill.

The next day I received an email from a parent who accused the school of bringing in the smoke machine purposely to scare her child by simulating a real fire. The parent was trying to advocate for her child but with her angry email, she set herself up as an adversary instead.

In the past 15 years, I have had lots of experience advocating for children. As a teacher, I try to advocate for support for students in a school system faced with increasing needs and decreased funding. And, since 2016, as a parent of three adopted children.

All of us want our children to be successful at school. The question is how best to advocate for our children's needs.



Alison Wagler has been a teacher for more than 15 years and an adoptive parent since 2016. Together, with her children, they have faced a variety of challenges in the school system.

## TIPS

### STEP ONE: ASK, DON'T ASSUME

Your child has come home to you upset about an incident at school and you are concerned about the report. What do you do now? Try to approach the situation in a way which will help build trust rather than put people on the defensive.

Whatever the issue, contact the teacher directly to find out more information. Children rarely present the whole picture of what has happened. There is usually more to it. Involve your child in the process as much as is appropriate.

### STEP TWO: CHECK YOUR EMOTIONS

When your child encounters a problem when you are not present your protective instincts kick in. Talk about how you are feeling with your partner or a trusted friend. When your children are around, be careful to speak respectfully of the people involved in the issue regardless of your personal feelings. Try to remain calm.

Recognize that the teacher is probably facing heightened emotions as well. They may be feeling defensive from past experiences and fear being attacked again. Start from a place of seeking understanding rather than blame.

### STEP THREE: DEFINE THE ISSUE

Is the issue **academic** (a specific assignment, your child's learning needs, the curriculum); **social/emotional** (your child's behaviour, an incident with another child, bullying, etc.); **teaching style** (the amount of structure the teacher provides, how your child is engaged); or about **support services** (the support your child receives either from a resource teacher or educational assistant)?



### STEP FOUR: LISTEN AND COLLABORATE

Inform the teacher of what your child has reported and ask the teacher's perspective on what has happened. Some misunderstandings can be cleared up right then. Others may require follow-up by the teacher or by an administrator. Here are some examples of helpful questions.

**Academic:** How are my child's learning needs being supported in the classroom? Is there a modification needed such as allowing more time, a quiet work space, fewer questions, etc.? How can we support the child?

**Social/emotional:** What did you observe of the incident? What part did my child play in the incident? Is there a planned follow-up or intervention?

**Teaching style:** Can you explain your teaching style? If the child is feeling sad or upset about going to school, ask if the teacher has noticed any changes.

**Support services:** How are resource teachers or education assistants allocated at the school? How much supported time does my child receive? Are they being pulled out or supported in the classroom?





# Ask the expert

Two experts from our community share answers to some common problems adoptive families may face.

## PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

**My six-year-old son's teacher says that he has learning disabilities and wants to have him assessed by a psychologist. What would these tests involve and how will they help?**

**Dr. Mark Bailey, registered psychologist, adoptive parent, responds:**

A psychological assessment used to evaluate a child's (or adult's) intellectual and academic skills is referred to as a psychoeducational assessment. An assessment invariably includes a test of intellectual ability (IQ) and another test of academic achievement, although tests of other cognitive skills (visual-motor skills, oral language skills, attention, nonverbal reasoning, etc.) are often included as well.

The primary goal of the psychoeducational assessment is to determine if a child's academic skill levels are consistent with what would be expected for that child considering his or her intellectual ability level/

IQ score. This is because a learning disability is defined as a condition in which a child's success in developing specific academic skills (i.e., reading, writing and/or arithmetic) is significantly lower than would be expected for that child based on his or her intellectual ability level.

In addition to determining whether a child's intellectual ability and academic achievement levels are consistent, the psychoeducational assessment will also help determine that child's pattern of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. This is often the most useful aspect of the assessment for the child, as it is using this pattern of strengths and weaknesses that recommendations for improving the child's learning can be determined. For example, it might be revealed that he or she is more of



an auditory learner than a visual learner, expresses his or her knowledge better verbally than through writing, or understands math concepts only when they are expressed via concrete examples.

Although a basic psychoeducational assessment (one incorporating only the IQ and academic achievement testing) is typically sufficient for diagnosing a learning disability, a more comprehensive assessment (such as a neuropsychological assessment) often provides additional information regarding a child's specific pattern of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. Once that pattern is determined, it can be used to help design the child's learning plan, which is referred to in the school system as the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Not every child has or needs an IEP, but it is important for a child with a learning disability, and will typically be created once the results of the psychoeducational assessment have been received by the school.

## ALL FAMILIES ARE REAL FAMILIES

**My six-year-old daughter came home from school very upset after a friend had told her that I was a "fake" mom. How can I help her face such difficult and insensitive comments?**

**Jennifer Hillman, former AFABC Family Support Worker, responds:**

First, have a discussion with your daughter regarding the remark that has been made. Allow her to express her feelings.

Review her story and use your books on adoption to reinforce how there are many different kinds of families. Use positive adoption language with your child and give her the tools and language to use it with her peers. See pg. 11 for examples of positive adoption language.

Second, talk to your child's teacher. Discuss the issue and share information on respectful adoption language, update them with on what adoption looks like today,

and offer to come in and do a presentation to the classroom on families and all the different ways they are formed.

If you are not comfortable doing the presentation, or your daughter says that she doesn't want you to, ask another adoptive parent or contact the AFABC office for assistance.

In my school presentations, I explain that all of us arrived in the world by birth. This leads to a discussion about all kinds of families: big, small, blended, foster, adoptive, multiracial, single parent, etc. I don't make adoptive families the entire focus of my talk. I tell my family story and use our family album to illustrate how our family came together.

The use of books is very important. I always start off with the book called *Families are Different* by Nina Pellegrini. *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* by Jamie Lee Curtis is also always a favourite.

Then there is time for questions and comments from the children. I also take an activity for the children—a sheet that has space for them to draw their family and why they are special. That way every child has a chance to share with me.

What I have found over the years is that children have the capacity to understand that we all belong to families. Once they do this they can become allies with one another.

The best way to help your child is, of course, to talk to their teacher before they start school or at the beginning of each new school year. Hopefully, that might at least reduce hurtful comments.

Other books that are great for presentations are *A Forever Family*, *Susan & Gordon Adopt a Baby*, *An Adoption Tale*, *Over the Moon*, and *Happy Adoption Day*. Visit [bcadoption.com/library](http://bcadoption.com/library) for more suggestions.



# Supports for youth

The government has expanded its services and supports for young adults who spent time in foster care. In this article, you'll learn about the BC government's expanded Tuition Waivers Program, as well as Agreements with Young Adults (AYA), and a number of other sources of funding and support.

## ACCESSIBLE EDUCATION

Post-secondary education can be the factor that makes the difference between an unsatisfying life and a thriving life. For young people with involvement in the child welfare system, barriers such as the cost of post-secondary tuition or a lack of family support can be hard to overcome.

For youth transitioning from care, some of these barriers are being addressed by government programs such as Agreements with Young Adults (AYA), tuition waivers, and access to free laptops and mobile phones. In addition, there are a number of scholarships, bursaries, and grants specifically for youth with government care experience.

## TUITION WAIVERS

Since September 2017, free tuition, known as the Tuition Waiver Program, has been available at all 25 public post-secondary institutions in BC. And since July 2018, tuition waivers have been expanded to include trades apprenticeships and training.

## AGEDOUT.COM

AgedOut.com is for young adults who were in government care in BC. It's an up-to-date warehouse of information on resources and services available to young adults and a learning tool to help people feel empowered as they leave care.

You can learn more about the Tuition Waiver Program, AYAs, and other supports on [AgedOut.com/education](https://agedout.com/education).

**To be eligible for a tuition waiver you must be between the ages of 19 and 26 and have either:**

- Been in care of the BC government for at least 2 years (includes Voluntary Care Agreement, Special Needs Agreements, Temporary Custody Order or a Continuing Custody Order); or
- Lived with a family member (other than a parent) or another adult for at least two years, as part of an agreement or custody order with the Ministry of Children and Family Development or a Delegated Aboriginal Agency; or
- Been on a youth agreement for at least two years.

As long as you apply for the tuition waiver prior to your 27th birthday the Ministry will cover your tuition for the length of your program.

In addition, seven post-secondary institutions offer their own tuition waivers for youth in and from care. If you do not qualify for a provincial tuition waiver, consider reaching out to the following institutions and check out their eligibility requirements!

Additional waivers are available at: University of British Columbia (UBC), Langara College, Selkirk College, University of Victoria (UVIC), Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT), Vancouver Island University (VIU), British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT), and Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC).

For example, UBC's institution waivers require one year of care versus the provincial tuition waivers which require two years.

## **AGREEMENTS WITH YOUNG ADULTS (AYA)**

Unlike tuition waivers, AYA has much tighter eligibility criteria. To qualify for AYA, a young person must have had one of the following care statuses: continuing custody order, youth agreement, or in the process of



adoption. The agreements can last for up to 48 months. They cover living expenses, health care, and child care for youth transitioning out of care onto one of the following:

- Finishing high school;
- Attending university or college;
- Completing a rehabilitation program;
- Completing a life skills program (see list of approved life skills programs on AgedOut.com);

AYA recipients pursuing post-secondary education may qualify for a free laptop and/or a cell phone. The AYA information sheets on AgedOut.com outline the process and contain direct links to applications.

## **OTHER SUPPORTS**

There are several other post-secondary funding opportunities for young people leaving care. The government provides up to \$5,500 per student in additional support through the Youth Educational Assistance Fund (YEAFF). Some non-profit organizations also offer bursaries and scholarships. A bursary is money awarded based on your financial need, often given as a cheque at the start of the school year; a scholarship is money awarded for having high grades or other achievements.

The [AgedOut.com](https://agedout.com) website has an information page dedicated to bursaries and scholarships.



# adopt

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