

## Finding and Working With Adoption-Competent Therapists

Adoption has a lifelong impact on those who experience it. After an adoption is finalized, therapy can be a useful support to help adoptive families with challenges that may arise at different phases of life. It is just one component of a range of services for adoptive families that can effectively address issues related to grief, attachment, or trauma. This factsheet provides suggestions for finding an adoption-competent therapist and offers information about the types of therapy that can help adopted children and their families. Foster parents considering adoption could face similar issues and therefore also may find definitions and descriptions in this factsheet useful.

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Experienced therapists who have a working understanding of loss, attachment, trauma, and brain development, as well as knowledge of issues associated with adoption, are best suited to help address the concerns of adoptive parents and effectively treat their children. Adoption-competent therapists understand that the origin of a child's problems may be embedded in the abuse or neglect experienced before the child was adopted. They believe that children can heal within the

context of new family relationships and with parents who have the skills to support children who come from traumatic beginnings. The therapist you choose must recognize the importance of including parents (and possibly other family members) in the treatment process. If you seek treatment from a therapist who attempts to exclude you as a parent, you may want to reconsider whether that professional is appropriate for you and your family.

## Therapy as Part of Adoption Support and Preservation Services

Adoptive families and adoption professionals recognize that children and families need different kinds of support and that those needs change over time. Like all families, adoptive families may seek therapy more than once as children go through different developmental stages and their needs change. Before adoption, during different developmental stages, and throughout life events—such as graduating from school, starting at a new school, getting married, and experiencing a death in the family—therapists can help children who have been adopted make sense of their feelings and emotional responses to these challenges. These life changes affect the parent and other family members as well, so they may also benefit from working with a therapist.

Beyond therapy, other types of adoption support and preservation services (sometimes called postadoption services) are available. Postadoption supports 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 birth parents. Support may include educational seminars, webinars, and support groups for parents and children. Parents are encouraged to use postadoption support as much as needed to help manage the issues common to adoption as well as the more complex challenges associated with children who may have experienced abuse or neglect.

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 any of the following Child Welfare Information Gateway resources:

- Accessing Adoption Support and Preservation Services (factsheet for families): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-postadoption/>
- Finding Services for an Adopted Child (webpage): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/services>

## Approaches to Therapy

Working with a therapist is not a sign of poor parenting but an opportunity to receive help that may be needed at different stages in a child's life and family development. Reaching out for help at the earliest sign of difficulty shows strength and gives your family the best chance of working through difficult issues effectively and together.

Before starting therapy, a complete assessment helps identify the challenges to be addressed. Assessments may be designed as questionnaires or involve conversation or observation. A thorough assessment includes a series of different tests that may require an overall health assessment conducted by a physician, a psychiatric evaluation conducted by a child psychiatrist, or a vocational assessment completed by professionals trained in identifying the strengths and needs of children in a variety of environments.

Mental health professionals may have training in a variety of treatment approaches to meet the diverse needs of the clients they serve. Before selecting a therapist, ask about the types of treatment they specialize in and about their experience working with adoptive families. For more detailed information about selecting a therapist, see the Finding the Right Therapist section of this publication.

In addition to different treatment options, different types of professionals provide therapy. Knowing your options is important. More information on various types of mental health professionals, as well as a helpline to assist in finding services in your State, is available on the website for the National Alliance on Mental Illness at <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/treatment/types-of-mental-health-professionals>.

Below are descriptions of different treatment approaches, followed by links to websites with general descriptions and examples of these therapies.

**Behavior Modification.** This therapy focuses on the specific behaviors that are of concern to a family.

- Behavior Modification: <http://www.tccwv.org/Our-Approach/Behavior-Modification.aspx>
- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy: <http://www.pcit.org/>

**Family Therapy.** This therapy seeks to achieve a balance between the needs of the individual and those of the family. The therapist uses sessions to build attachment relationships and improve communication between parents and children.

- Family Therapy: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/family-therapy/about/pac-20385237>

**Group Therapy.** This therapy allows a small group of clients with similar issues to discuss them together in an organized way.

- The Benefits of Group Therapy: <http://www.insteppc.com/the-benefits-of-group-therapy/>
- Parenting With Love and Limits: <http://www.nafi.com/innovations/parenting-with-love-and-limits>

**Play Therapy.** Therapists customarily use this form of therapy with very young children, who may not be able to express their feelings and fears verbally.

- Why Play Therapy?: <http://www.a4pt.org/page/WhyPlayTherapy>
- Theraplay®: <https://www.theraplay.org/index.php/theraplay>

## Situations and Treatments to Avoid

Treatments such as "holding therapy," "rebirthing therapy," or other types of treatment that involve restraint of the child or unwelcome or disrespectful intrusion into the child's physical space have raised serious concerns among parents and professionals. You should also avoid treatments that exclude the parents' involvement in the process. 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.

**Cognitive Therapy.** This therapy begins with the idea that the way people perceive situations influences how they feel. It is typically time limited, problem solving, and focused on the present.

- Alternatives for Families: A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: <https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/alternatives-families-cognitive-behavioral-therapy>
- What Is Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)?: <https://beckinstitute.org/get-informed/what-is-cognitive-therapy/>
- What Is Cognitive Therapy?: <https://www.cognitivetherapynyc.com/What-Is-Cognitive-Therapy.aspx>

**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 therapy focuses on specific ways to help process traumatic memories and experiences so they become tolerable.

- ADOPTS (Address the Distress of Posttraumatic Stress) Therapy: <https://qic-ag.org/logs/adopts-therapy/>
- Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: <https://www.nctsn.org/interventions/trauma-focused-cognitive-behavioral-therapy>
- What Is Trauma-Focused Therapy?: <http://cctasi.northwestern.edu/family/trauma-focused-therapy/>

More information can be found on the National Child Traumatic Stress Network website at <https://www.nctsn.org/>.

**Attachment-Focused Therapy.** This therapy focuses on building a secure emotional attachment between the child and his or her parents that can serve as a model for future positive relationships in all aspects of the child's life.

- Child Parent Psychotherapy – CPP: <https://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org/child-parent-psychotherapy-cpp/>
- Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP): <https://qic-ag.org/logs/dyadic-developmental-psychotherapyddp/>

## A Word About Attachment

The effect of abuse and neglect on the developing brain has revealed a lot about why children from chaotic and threatening homes often struggle to adjust to safe environments and lead healthy, positive lives. Children's experiences with child maltreatment can negatively affect brain development and, consequently, the emotional, social, and behavioral functioning of the child. This can disrupt their ability to form healthy attachments, which allow children to trust and to form meaningful relationships throughout their lives. Children may experience attachment problems that range from difficulties relating to others to severe social-functioning disorders. Appropriate treatments can help parents build and foster secure attachments and cope with the behaviors that may result from earlier attachment disruptions.

- For information about attachment disorders, see <https://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org/what-are-attachment-disorders/>
- For information about attachment and signs of attachment problems, see <http://www.attach.org/faq/>
- To find resources for parents, see <http://www.attach.org/for-parents/>

## Finding the Right Therapist

Many different types of professionals provide mental health services. It is important to find an adoption-competent therapist who can address your family's needs. Finding the right therapist means searching for one who has adoption-related experience and, if possible, has been trained in adoption competency. Take time to interview therapists by phone or in person to find the one with whom you feel most comfortable and who is the best qualified to help your child and family.

**Interviewing Prospective Therapists.** 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 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? (Be specific about the adoption issues that affect your family, such as open adoption; transracial adoption; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning adoption; searching for birth relatives; children who have experienced abuse or institutionalization; or children with attachment difficulties.)
- How long have you been in practice, and what degrees, licenses, or certifications do you have?
- Have you taken any courses/trainings in adoption competency?
- What approach to therapy do you use? (See "Approaches to Therapy" above.)
- 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 a child's progress?
- Can you estimate a time frame for the course of therapy?
- Do you work with teachers, juvenile justice personnel, daycare providers, and other adults in the child'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. For more information about types of mental health professionals, visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness at <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Treatment/Types-of-Mental-Health-Professionals>.

**Identifying Prospective Therapists.** Because adopted children can present the same problems common to all children, the therapist must be skilled in determining what problems are due to adoption and what problems are not. At a minimum, a therapist must be knowledgeable about the following issues:

- The psychological impact of adoption on children and families
- Loss as a core issue in adoption and how children 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 before adoption
- The role and impact of attachment on the mind and body of the developing child

The therapist must also have the following:

- Experience in working with adopted children and their families
- Knowledge of the types of help available for adoption-related issues and problems
- Training in working with adoptive families

To find a therapist, you may contact community adoption support networks, ask your placement agency for referrals to therapists, 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. Staff at some adoption agencies and postadoption services agencies are mental health therapists trained in adoption.



Also check the following resources for therapist recommendations:

- Directory of Adoption-Competent Professionals: <http://adoptionssupport.org/member-types/adoption-competent-professionals>
- National Foster Care and Adoption Directory Search (<https://childwelfare.gov/nfcad>) for:
  - Public and private adoption agencies
  - Local adoptive parent support groups
  - Specialized postadoption services agencies
  - State adoption offices
- Family Preservation Services (webpage): <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/supporting/preservation>
- Agency social workers involved in the child's adoption
- State or local mental health associations
- National and State professional organizations (See "National Resource Organizations" below.)

## Working With a Therapist

Your involvement in and support of your child's therapy is critical to a positive outcome. For therapy to be successful, open communication between you, your child, and your therapist is a must. It's important to keep scheduled appointments and commit to the full course length of treatment. Children whose lives have been affected by significant losses and traumas may require more extensive sessions or longer periods of treatment. While some children or teens may be resistant to engaging in therapy, you should refrain from using therapy sessions as punishment for their resistance or misbehavior. Family members must communicate regularly with the therapist about ongoing concerns as well as progress achieved. 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 thereafter. Evaluation meetings will help all parties assess the progress of treatment and offer the opportunity to discuss the following:

- Satisfaction with the working relationship between the therapist, child, 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

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 appropriately. Discussing a change with the therapist may provide an opportunity to hear their 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, especially if the child has developed a positive relationship with the first therapist. Remember the child's history of loss and how to model healthy closure. Trust your thoughts and feelings; you are the expert on your children and you must decide what makes sense for them.

## Insurance Coverage and Other Funding for Therapy

The cost of therapy varies and may be covered in part by health insurance or the child's adoption assistance agreement. Some States have extensive postadoption/guardianship services that include comprehensive assessment, therapy, case management, support groups, and other services that are free to adoptive and subsidized guardianship children and families. 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 is 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 website of the North American Council on Adoptable Children at <https://www.nacac.org/help/adoption-assistance/adoption-assistance-us/state-programs>. For State-specific information on adoption assistance, visit Information Gateway's Adoption Assistance by State webpage at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-assistance>.

## 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 child's and family's needs. 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 active role in engaging the right therapist, committing to the process, and being a part of the treatment.

## National Resource Organizations

### AdoptUSKids

Provides information and resources free of charge to adoptive families  
888.200.4005, [info@adoptuskids.org](mailto:info@adoptuskids.org)  
<https://www.adoptuskids.org>

### American Academy of Pediatrics

Supports the professional needs of pediatricians who work to improve the health and well-being of all children  
847.433.9016, [csc@aap.org](mailto:csc@aap.org)  
<https://www.aap.org>  
Referrals: <https://www.healthychildren.org/english/tips-tools/find-pediatrician/Pages/Pediatrician-Referral-Service.aspx>

### American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

Represents the professional interests of therapists concerned with the overall, long-term well-being of individuals and their families  
703.838.9808  
<https://www.aamft.org>  
Referrals: [https://www.aamft.org/Directories/Find\\_a\\_Therapist.aspx](https://www.aamft.org/Directories/Find_a_Therapist.aspx)

### American Psychiatric Association

Works to ensure humane care and effective treatment for all persons with mental illness  
202.559.3900, [apa@psych.org](mailto:apa@psych.org)  
<https://www.psychiatry.org>  
Referrals: <http://finder.psychiatry.org>

### American Psychological Association

Works to benefit society and improve people's lives by creating, communicating, and applying psychological knowledge  
800.964.2000, [practice@apa.org](mailto:practice@apa.org)  
<http://www.apa.org>  
Referrals: <http://locator.apa.org>

### Association for Play Therapy

Promotes the value and therapeutic power of play to communicate with and treat children  
559.298.3400, [info@a4pt.org](mailto:info@a4pt.org)  
<http://www.a4pt.org>  
Referrals: <http://www.a4pt.org/page/TherapistDirectory>

### Association for Training on Trauma and Attachment in Children

Provides training to parents and professionals to promote healthy attachment and heal trauma  
612.861.4222, [questions@attach.org](mailto:questions@attach.org)  
<http://www.attach.org>

### California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare

Offers many resources and studies on cognitive and other therapies

<http://www.cebc4cw.org>

### Center for Adoption Support and Education

Provides adoption-competent education, resources, and support services, including mental health services, for foster and adoptive families

301.476.8525, [caseadopt@adoptionssupport.org](mailto:caseadopt@adoptionssupport.org)

<http://adoptionssupport.org>

Referrals: <http://adoptionssupport.org/member-types/adoption-competent-professionals>

### ChildTrauma Academy

Works to improve the lives of high-risk children through direct service, research, and education

866.943.9779, [cta@childtrauma.org](mailto:cta@childtrauma.org)

<http://childtrauma.org>

### Child Welfare Information Gateway

Promotes the safety, permanency, and well-being of families and children by connecting them to information, resources, and tools covering topics on adoption and more

800.394.3366, [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)

<https://www.childwelfare.gov>

- National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search  
<http://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad>
- Choosing Therapy for Adopted Children and Youth  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-parenting/services/therapy>
- Lifelong Impact of Adoption  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/adopt-people/impact>
- Understanding the Emotional Impact of Adoption  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/birthfor/emotional-impact>

- Finding Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Treatment Services in Your State  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/bhw/resources/mh-sud>

### National Adoption Center

Supports the adoption community by providing free adoptive services

215.735.9988, [nac@adopt.org](mailto:nac@adopt.org)

<http://www.adopt.org>

### National Association of Social Workers

Works to enhance the professional growth and development of social workers, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies

202.408.8600

<https://www.socialworkers.org>

Referrals: [http://www.helpstartshere.org/helpstartshere/?page\\_id=3677](http://www.helpstartshere.org/helpstartshere/?page_id=3677)

### 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

651.644.3036, [info@nacac.org](mailto:info@nacac.org)

<https://www.nacac.org>

### National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Provides information on types of trauma, parenting, and treatments

919.682.1552, [info@nctsn.org](mailto:info@nctsn.org)

<https://www.nctsn.org/>

### Theraplay Institute

Provides Theraplay® training for mental health professionals, parents, and teachers

847.256.7334

<http://www.theraplay.org>



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau

