

Adoption Advocate



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BACK TO SCHOOL: A GUIDE TO MAKING SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS MORE ADOPTION-FRIENDLY*

by *Christine Mitchell*

Introduction

It is September, which means back to school. For many children, it means the end of lazy summer days, as well as the fun of seeing old friends and making new ones. For some children, it can also mean the stress of school assignments that are difficult and/or burdensome for them to complete. Adoption can include both happiness and loss. Children in foster care as well as those who have been adopted often face intrusive questions and false assumptions, particularly if they are a part of multiracial families. Because children spend a great deal of time at school, the messages they receive in the classroom about families, adoption, and diversity all play a role in shaping their self-worth and feelings about their families.

Schools can support adopted children and children in foster care by providing a sensitive and tolerant environment in which adoption, multiracial and diverse families, and various family configurations are positively reflected in the classroom. Parents can help to educate teachers, administrators, and school staff about respectful adoption language, and about modifying family-related assignments to accommodate adoptive families, as well as about strategies for helping children cope with

insensitive questions and comments from their peers.

Some parents are reluctant to tell teachers that their child was adopted (if the adoption is not obvious), fearing that he will face negative stereotypes or teasing from classmates. However, teachers who have not been informed will not be prepared to be flexible with potentially problematic assignments or help support the student as he deals with adoption-related issues.¹ It is important to remember that a child's adoption story is exactly that: his story. Teachers may need to be reminded that personal details should be kept strictly confidential unless the child volunteers them. Parents need only disclose that information which may help the school meet their child's needs. To respect the child's privacy, it is best to avoid sharing details about the birth family's situation that are not relevant to her current issues.

This guide will help foster and adoptive parents advocate for their children, and will also help educators be more aware of and sensitive to the needs and issues of children in foster care as well as those who have been adopted. We encourage adoptive families to share it with educators and administrators at their children's schools.

*This article is adapted from Christine Mitchell's *Adoption Awareness in School Assignments: A Guide for Parents and Educators*, the full text of which can be found at www.christine-mitchell.com.

The Family Tree...and Other Dreaded School Assignments

Some Typical Experiences

One day ten-year-old Maria brought home a writing assignment from school that asked some fairly personal questions about her birth, including:

- How long was your mother in labor?
- Were you born before or after your due date? By how much?
- Who was at the hospital?
- How were you named?
- What were your first weeks at home like?

Maria was extremely upset by this project; she and her mother, Barbara, could answer only five of the 17 questions. Furthermore, they could not provide a baby picture of Maria, as requested, because Barbara and her husband adopted Maria when she was three years old. The information they have about their daughter's birth family and history is very limited, and it is not information they would choose to share with her entire class. Additionally, they have no photos of her before age three. Maria's teacher was aware that she had been adopted as a preschooler, but it didn't occur to him that this assignment would distress her.

When eight-year-old Damien was in first grade, his foster mother knew there was a project coming up that he could not possibly complete. The students would be asked to gather pictures of themselves as newborns and at ages one, two, three, four, five, and six. The photos would be mounted on posters and displayed in the classroom on Back-to-School Night and for several weeks after. Damien, however, had no pictures of himself before age five. While he might have chosen to draw pictures of himself at different ages, it would still have been quite painful to have classmates ask why he didn't have photographs. Instead, his foster mother spoke with the teacher, who agreed to modify the assignment. She allowed the children to choose between presenting pictures of themselves at different ages or photos that showed them enjoying different activities.

The Need for More Inclusive Assignments

There are over 1.8 million adopted children in the United States.² According to the most recent reports, there are 423,773 children currently in foster care.³ Several common school assignments can make children in foster care or children who have been adopted feel left out, uncomfortable, sad, or hurt. Projects like the "Family Tree", "Bring-a-Baby Picture" and "Trace Your Genetic Traits" can be particularly difficult for students adopted at older ages; however, children adopted as infants and those living in foster care may also lack the information for some family-based assignments.

Adopted children have, at the very least, experienced the loss of their birthparents. Some have also endured abuse and neglect, and have spent years in foster homes or orphanages. Basing lessons on a traditional family configuration not only excludes these students, but may also trigger feelings of grief.⁴

Many teachers are not aware of the negative impact of these projects on adopted children or those in foster care until the subject is brought to their attention. Of course a teacher can't always anticipate that a family history assignment is problematic for a particular child. Fortunately, these assignments can be easily modified to work for children in all different types of family configurations without sacrificing the educational goals. The solution generally involves broadening the scope of the assignment by offering students more choices. It is helpful to keep in mind the goals of the assignment and different ways to reach those goals, rather than emphasizing that all students' end products be the same.⁵

Addressing a Reluctance to Change

Some teachers and administrators are reluctant to "fix" something they don't see as "broken." Below are several common objections to altering school assignments, followed by an alternative viewpoint.

- "The school cannot cater to every possible



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situation where a student might be offended.”
True. But if an assignment is known to be hurtful or difficult for a certain number of students, and it can be easily modified, the caring and supportive thing to do is to make the change.

- “Only a handful of students are affected.”
How many students would need to be affected before we try to avoid upsetting and embarrassing them unnecessarily? At most schools there are more than a few adopted children school-wide. Some of the assignments are problematic for kids adopted as infants as well as those adopted at older ages.
- “It is the parents' responsibility to communicate with the teacher.” *Certainly it is helpful for parents to discuss their concerns with the child's teacher, assuming they feel comfortable sharing their child's background with the teacher. Some families prefer to keep this information private. Even if parents talk with individual teachers, there is no harm in the school also bringing these issues to the attention of all staff members.*
- “It would be difficult to modify these assignments. The teachers already have so many assignments and tasks they are juggling.” *For most teachers, only one or two projects would be affected. As instructors tend to repeat lessons and assignments from year to year, it is a case of modifying the assignment just once and carrying the new assignment forward in future years. Master assignments could be distributed to all teachers.*
- “Schools all across the country have been using these same assignments for years.”
True. Just because a practice is widespread does not make it fair to all children.

Schools today encompass increasingly diverse populations of students. In addition to a wide variety of ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, students come from many types of family situations, including adoptive and foster families. Educators, understanding that family-based

assignments can be challenging and painful for these students, should be encouraged to assign alternatives that are appropriate for all students.

Here are some common school assignments and the corresponding challenges or problems they present for adopted children and children in foster care, followed by suggestions to make these assignments more accessible for all students, regardless of their family structure:

Specific Assignments and How They Can Be Changed⁶

“Bring a Baby Picture” or “Bring Photos of Yourself at Every Age from Birth”

1. **Problem:** A child adopted internationally or from foster care may not have photos of herself before age two, three, or even older.
 - a) “Bring a baby picture” assignments emphasize an issue that may already be extremely painful for children who don't have these photos.
 - b) This project puts the child in the difficult position of explaining to other kids why he doesn't have baby pictures. The child may not want to share that he was adopted at all, much less further details.
2. **Solution:** Present the assignment as a choice. Bring a picture or pictures of yourself:
 - a) As a baby or any younger age, *or*
 - b) On various holidays, *or*
 - c) Enjoying various activities (sports, dance, chorus, vacations, etc.)

Family Tree Assignments

1. **Problem:** The standard format does not allow for foster, adoptive, birth, or step-parents and siblings.
2. **Solution:** Rather than avoiding the family tree assignment, parents and educators can use it as a tool to teach children about the many varieties of family structures. Offer a choice of the following formats (see also



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the sample worksheets at the end of this article):

- a) *The Rooted Family Tree*, in which the roots represent the birth family, the child is the trunk, and the foster, adoptive, and/or step-family members fill in the branches.
- b) *The Family Wheel Diagram*, in which the child is in the middle and the outer rings of the circle represent the birth, foster, adoptive, or step-family relationships.
- c) *The Family Houses Diagram*, which uses houses instead of trees to show connections between birth, foster, adoptive, and step-family members.

Autobiographies and Family History Assignments

1. **Problem:** For many children, the information about their early years might be painful and private. These children face a difficult conflict: *Do I screen out painful memories or should I be honest?*
2. **Solution:** Offer students a choice to write about any of the following:
 - a) My Life
 - b) When I was Younger
 - c) My Life in the Past Year
 - d) A Special Event or Person in My Life

Cultural or Ethnic Heritage Assignments

1. **Problem:** A child's ethnic or cultural background may be different from that of his family. The student may be instructed to write about her birth heritage, even though she might prefer to study her adoptive family's culture, or vice versa.
2. **Solution:** Since the goal is for students to learn about other cultures, allow them to choose any country or culture of interest rather than one based on their family.

Create a Timeline of the Student's Life

1. **Problem:** A child and his parents may have little or no information about his early milestones. Another child may wonder if she needs to include private information such as the dates of relinquishment, foster care stays, or adoption finalization.
2. **Solution:** Do not require that the timeline begin from the child's birth, just that it cover a certain period of time. Alternatively, allow children to create a timeline for a historical or fictional character.

Positive Adoption Language

As a general rule, it is important for teachers to use positive adoption language. Here are some guidelines:

1. Instead of "natural" or "real" mother/father/parents/family, use "birth" or "biological." Adopted children and adoptive parents consider their family to be *real*.
2. Instead of "adoptive" mom/dad/parents/family, just use mom/dad/parents/family, unless it is relevant to add "adoptive."
3. Instead of "your own child," say "birth" or "biological" child. Adopted children *are* "our own."
4. The phrase "was adopted" is preferable to "is adopted."
5. Avoid using the term "adoption" to refer to an animal, highway, or anything else that is not a person. Using the term widely implies that adoption means paying money for something or someone, and belittles the lifelong bond between parent and child. Whenever possible, try to use alternate phrases such as "take a pet home" or "sponsor a highway."

For more information on positive adoption language, see:



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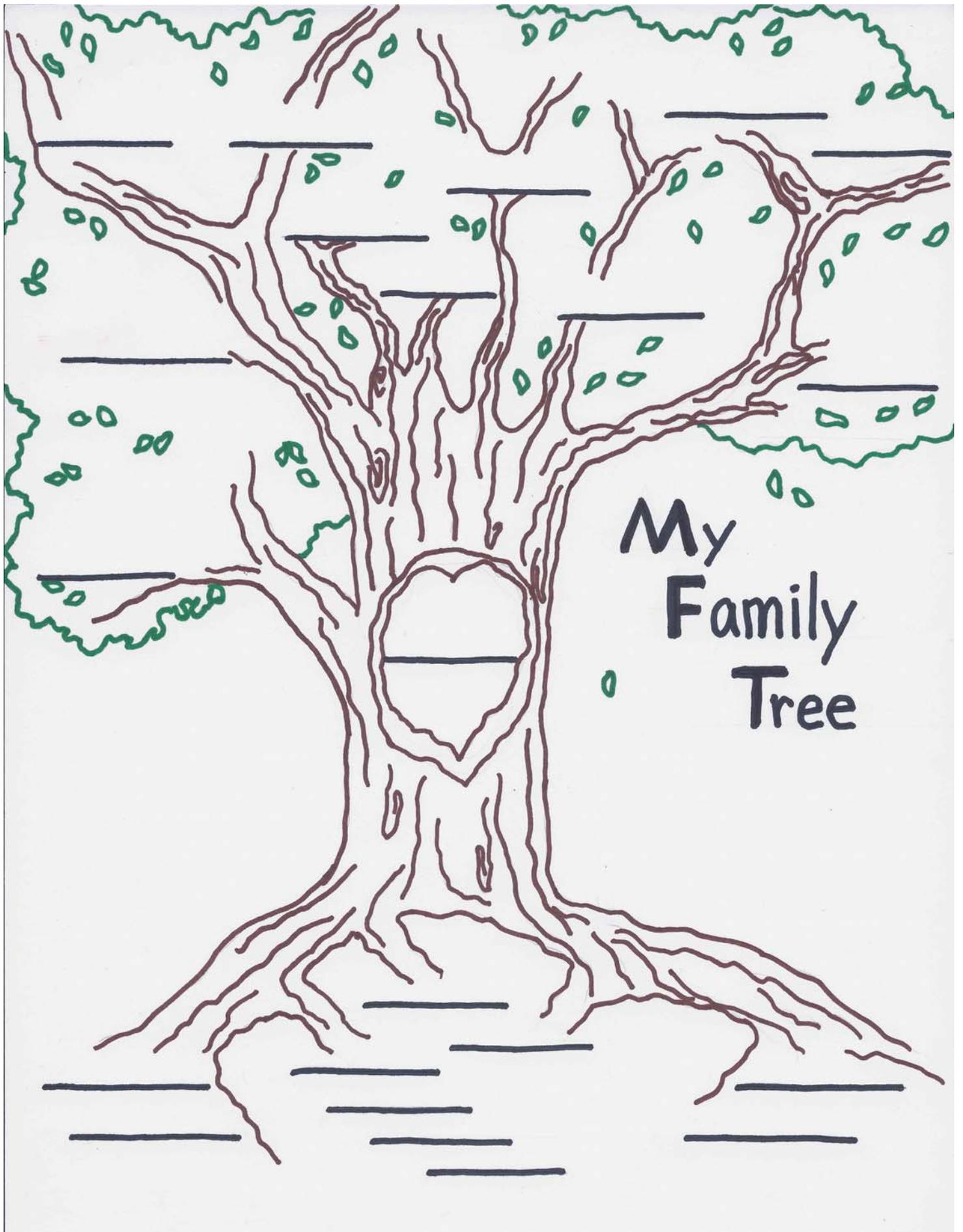
- NACAC's *National Adoption Month Awareness Guide* at <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/education.pdf>
- NCFA's *Accurate Adoption Language* at http://www.infantadopt.org/pdf_documents/Accurate%20Adoption%20Language.pdf

Creating an Adoption-Inclusive School and Classroom Environment

There are several things teachers and administrators can do to help create schools and classrooms that promote positive attitudes towards adoption. These include:

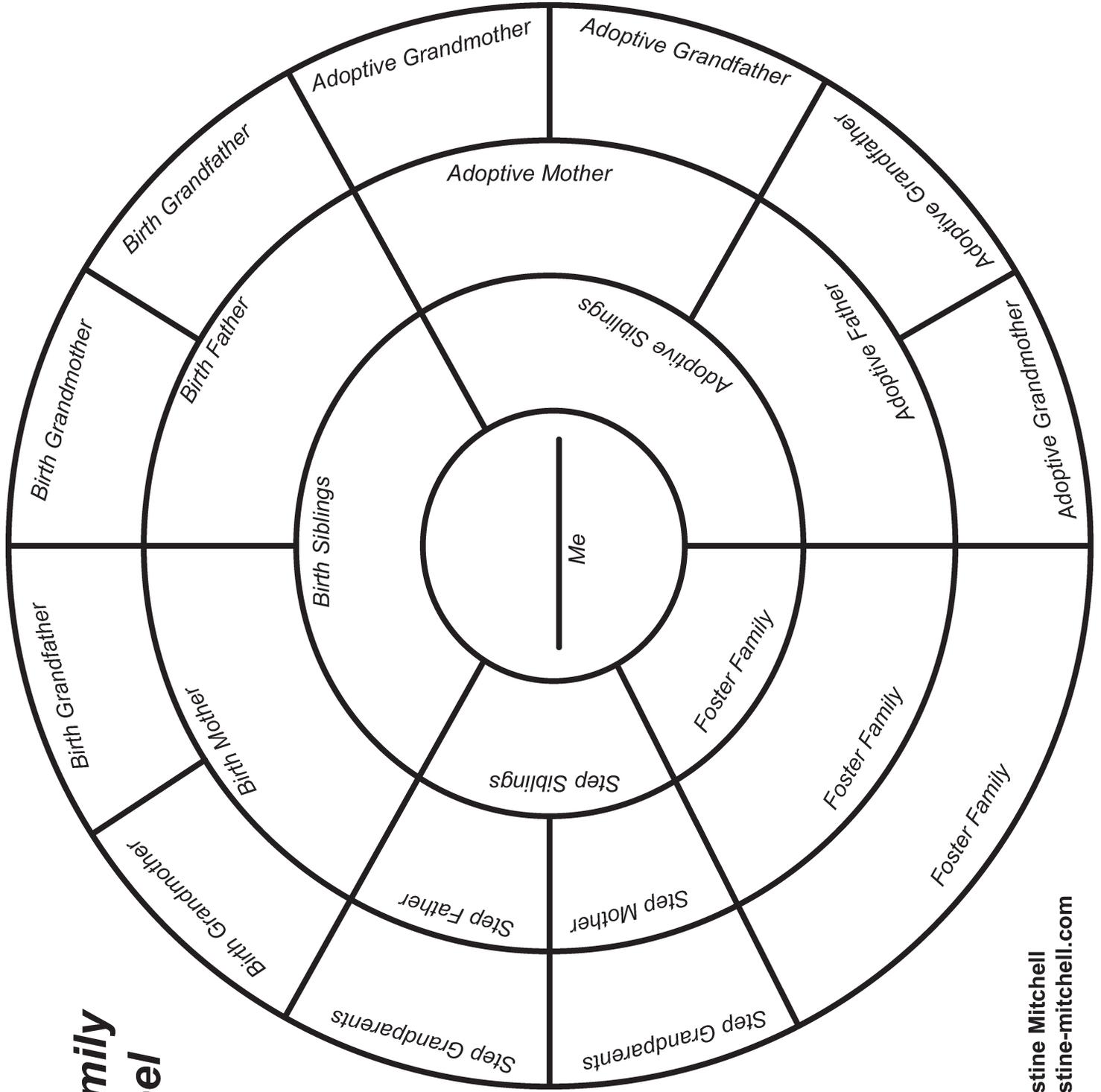
1. Making sure there are books in the school and classroom libraries that feature adoption as a theme or characters that were adopted.
2. Inviting an adult adopted individual, birth-parent, or adoptive parent to be a guest speaker during the month of November, which is National Adoption Month.
3. Incorporating other suggestions found in *Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children and How Educators Can Help*: “Opportunities in daily lessons arise when adoption can be discussed in a positive, matter-of-fact way, reinforcing the idea that adoption is just another way of forming a family. Adoption can be discussed during lessons about multi-cultural, blended, or ‘different’ families; during discussions of genetics...or when literature has adoption or foster care as part of the story” (p. 10).⁷



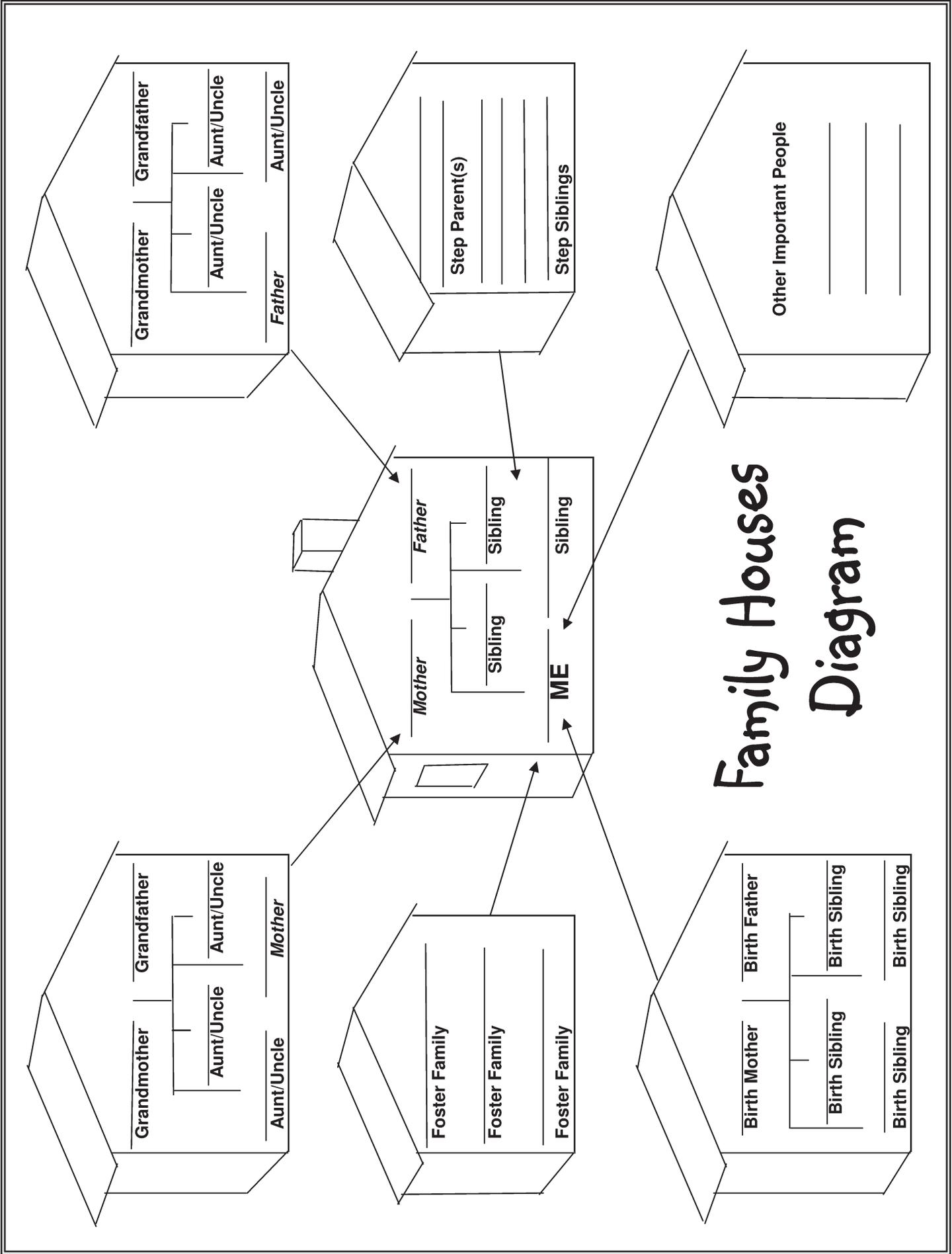


My
Family
Tree

My Family Wheel



Family Houses Diagram



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Adopting.org page on family trees: <http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/creative-family-trees-for-adoptive-foster-blended-families-page-1-4.html>

Adoption Together's training curriculum, *Adoption, Foster and Kinship Care: Increasing Awareness in Your School*, available at: <http://www.adoptionstogether.org/TrainingforEducators.asp>

Adoptive Families Magazine's resource page on adoption and school:
<http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/school/index.php>

Center for Adoption Support and Education's *S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators*, available at: <http://yhst-28828629093147.stores.yahoo.net/book.html>

Family Helper's *Teacher's Guide to Adoption*, available at: <http://www.familyhelper.net/ad/adteach.html>

Institute for Adoption Information's *An Educator's Guide to Adoption*, available at:
<http://www.adoptioninformationinstitute.org/education.html>

¹Keefer, B. & Schooler, J.E. (2000). *Telling the truth to your adopted or foster child: Making sense of the past*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

²Vandivere, S., Malm, K., & Radcliff, L. (2009). *Adoption USA: A Chartbook based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*. Washington, D.C.: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

³Crary, D. (2010). *New data: Many fewer US kids in foster care*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gq1yhAPK8txoVpGAPujSMUK9wz5gD9HULPCG4>

⁴MN Adopt. (nd). *Fact sheet: Adoption-competent school assignments*. Retrieved from
<http://www.mnadopt.org/Factsheets/Adoption%20Competent%20School%20Assignments.pdf>

⁵NACAC. (nd). *National Adoption Month awareness guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/education.pdf>

⁶Information on school assignments taken from:

- MN Adopt. (nd). *Fact sheet: Adoption-competent school assignments*. Retrieved from <http://www.mnadopt.org/Factsheets/Adoption%20Competent%20School%20Assignments.pdf>
- Adoptive Families Magazine. (2007). *Tackling tricky assignments*. Retrieved from <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/Assignments.pdf>

⁷Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association. (nd). *Adoption basics for educators: How adoption impacts children & how educators can help*. Retrieved from http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/AdoptionBasicsforEducators.pdf

†**About the author:** Christine Mitchell is the mother of two children, one through birth and one through adoption. She is the author of *Welcome Home, Forever Child: A Celebration of Children Adopted as Toddlers, Preschoolers, and Beyond*; *Family Day: Celebrating Ethan's Adoption Anniversary*; and *A Foster-Adoption Story: Angela and Michael's Journey, a Therapeutic Workbook*. For more information, please visit www.christine-mitchell.com.

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