



BY LOIS MELINA

What Your Child's Teacher Needs to Know

Teachers are facing increasing demands in the classroom, so it's up to you to take the necessary steps to make sure your child's needs are met.

By the time your child enters school, you have had enough experiences to know that not everyone understands adoption. When our children are young, they spend most of their time in public with us. If inappropriate comments are made, we either set protective boundaries or educate the person making the comments. But when children enter school, we can no longer be the buffer between them and those who are less than accepting of adoption.

Naturally, we look to teachers to take our place. As we have adapted baby books and family rituals to reflect the way our family was formed, we expect teachers to adapt lesson plans and classroom activities to validate our children in the classroom. As we are alert to signs that adoption is weighing heavily on our child, we look to teachers to recognize those signs. As we have confronted strangers in the grocery store who have implied that adoption is a less acceptable way of forming a family, we expect teachers to protect our child from negative attitudes.

At the same time, we want to maintain our child's privacy. We hope our pleas for attention to our child's needs are not interpreted to mean "My child is

fragile because she was adopted." Teachers do not bring formal training in adoption to their classrooms. They bring only the understanding that they have acquired through life experience and whatever informal resources to which they have had access. Some will be more prepared than others to take on the responsibility we ask of them.

We may want to ask ourselves if we are requiring more of teachers than we

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have a right to expect. After all, there are often 20 to 30 children in the classroom, each with unique needs. Imagine the burden of having 20 to 30 sets of parents saying to you: "Make sure no one teases my son because he has a physical disability, but don't treat him like an invalid." "Don't assume this child has a mommy and a daddy, because she has two mommies." "Do the books in your library show pictures of women whose religious traditions require that they cover their heads?"

It is possible, and often appropriate, to provide materials or learning opportunities to help the teacher understand the needs of the adopted child. But if we multiply that effort at education by 20 or 30 children, we're asking a lot of teachers. So we might ask ourselves, "If there's only one thing I want my child's teacher to know, what would it be?"

Families are Formed in Different Ways

Some of us want our children to be accepted without explanation. We want there to be an awareness that children join families in various ways, and that in today's world, the nontraditional family is commonplace. Since about 2 to 4 percent of the population were adopted, statistically, a child is likely to be one of only a few adopted children in any classroom. Or one of a few children of color living with white parents. Or one of a

few children negotiating relationships in an open adoption.

A teacher should not make the assumption that every child in the classroom can bring a baby picture for the bulletin board or tell the story of her birth. We don't want the teacher to act shocked if a child talks about a visit from her biological mother.

Neither do we want our child treated as an "exception." We don't want him given a different lesson plan or excused from an assignment because he doesn't



Respecting Your Child's Privacy

When you talk to a teacher about your child's needs, be sure to respect your child's privacy. I believe that only the child has the right to reveal the circumstances that led to her placement, or the details about her birthparents, unless there is someone, such as a therapist, who needs that information to help your child. A child's classroom teacher seldom has this need to know. In most cases, parents can explain the child's needs without explaining the background that led to those needs.

For example, perhaps a child has learning disabilities arising from prenatal drug exposure. It isn't necessary for the teacher to know the child's birthmother was a drug addict. You can simply say that your child has certain learning disabilities and needs special services.

The same is true for children who have serious behavior problems, such as attachment disorder, arising from sexual abuse or neglect they experienced in an orphanage. Simply say that your child has had a particular diagnosis and needs particular services, without explaining the cause.

Lois Melina, author of the highly regarded books **Raising Adopted Children** and **Making Sense of Adoption** has published **Adopted Child** newsletter since 1981.

Melina's newsletter has gained an international reputation as a trusted resource for adoptive parents.

We are pleased that **Adopted Child** is published in AF. Back issues are available from Lois Melina online: www.raising-adoptedchildren.com, or via phone: 888-882-1794.

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know his genealogy or the eye color of his ancestors. We want teachers to know that our child may feel insecure because she lost her birthparents. We want them to know that our child may feel inferior as she sorts out why her birthparents placed her for adoption. We want them to know these concerns can distract a child from learning.

At the same time, we don't want our child's teacher to expect that he will be socially or psychologically impaired because of his adoption issues. We don't want teachers to assume that our child will have "problems" in dealing with her adoption.

Talking to Teachers

If you expect sensitivity to adoption issues, it seems only fair to touch base with the teacher to see if that expectation is realistic. Parents who don't make that effort can't complain when a teacher responds in ways less than sensitive to an adopted child.

Make an appointment with your child's teacher early in the school year to discuss your child's circumstances. It's far more effective to be proactive rather than waiting until an incident occurs. By

giving the teacher a heads-up, she won't be put on the defensive. Explain your family situation and discuss whatever adoption issues might be surfacing at your child's developmental age. Communicate matter-of-factly. Don't imply that your child needs to be handled with kid gloves because she was adopted. You may even want to provide the teacher with books or handouts that describe how to adapt classroom projects, such as the family tree assignment, for adopted children. (See *Rethinking the Family Tree*, page 39.)

Another approach might be to join with other parental advocacy groups in developing a strategy to promote tolerance in general throughout the school district. If adoptive parents, step-parents, gay and lesbian parents, and birthparents joined together to talk about a common need for heightened awareness of differences, the impact could be much greater than if you tried on your own. Perhaps an advisory group could provide in-service training for school personnel and serve as a sounding board for those who want to be inclusive without becoming victims of "political correctness."

When parents join together to discuss the situations that teachers need to be aware of in the classroom, they create an opportunity for families to learn about each other. The tolerance that we look to the teacher to foster in the classroom would be reinforced in each child's home.

Is there a topic you'd like Lois Melina to address?

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