



Adoption Competent School Assignments

Teachers should try this test. Put yourself in second grade, doing an assignment typically given for this age group. How would you "draw your family tree" or "write down your family origins" or "relate shared memories of times spent with grandparents," if you were:

- A child of divorced parents, living with a parent and a step parent.
- A foster child, with biological parents and a series of foster parents.
- An adopted child

Some children will find it tough to do class assignments because their families are a lot more complicated than mom-dad-and-two-kids. That's not the kids' fault; it's the teaching system which is biased toward traditional views and insensitive to the complexity of family life. Teachers who base assignments on the traditional family are harming students who don't fit the traditional mold, excluding and making these students feel out of place. Inclusive curriculum should include the experiences of all children, not just those from traditional families.

Teachers can make lessons inclusive without sacrificing the educational goal. The general solution is to broaden lesson plans to include everyone. But exactly how do you do that? Here are specific examples of how to remove bias from class assignments.

Draw Your Family Tree

The bias: The usual printed family tree has blanks for one mother and one father and their ancestors, but no space for foster, adoptive, birth or step parents and their ancestors. How can a child leave out part of the family? This can be a real source of inner turmoil.

The fix: Since some children have grown on two or more trees, redraw the standard family tree diagram to accommodate the diversity in family structure. Try the Rooted Tree: birth ancestors are roots growing downward; branches show foster, adoptive or step parents and their ancestors. Other improvements are the Family Bush, Orchard, or Forest, with family members growing side by side. The Loving Tree has the child in the trunk and heart-shaped fruit representing all the family members the child knows of, without regard to time or place.



Or abandon the tree metaphor and try the Self Wheel (child at the center, relatives surround in nested circles), or My Home (house frame with people inside), or a genealogical chart with symbols for people and lines showing relationships. Children could brainstorm a list of different family types. Offer them a variety of "trees"

In a creative art project, students could portray their a drawing, painting, coloring or sculpture, using the ways families are formed. Point out that, worldwide, few families. Cover extended, foster, adoptive, step and Teachers need not avoid the family tree assignment, but a lesson in the varieties of family structure

Bring in Your Baby Picture

The bias: Asking for baby photos excludes those who may not have any such as some foster, adopted or immigrant children who are going to feel left out. If the object is to match the photo with the child today, children who are a visible minority are eliminated from the fun.

The fix: Reach the same educational goal for everyone in the class by broadening the assignment. To illustrate growth and change, bring a picture when the child was younger or smaller, or follow the growth of a baby chick after hatching. To describe a child, bring in something else which tells us more about her such as a book, a trophy or a pet. To test reasoning ability (“Guess who this is?”), bring a picture of someone we all know; or, describe someone with three clues, adding one at a time until someone guesses correctly.

Write the Story of Your Life

The bias: Writing a life story or family history is possible only for children who know their family roots. Adopted children may know nothing of their previous life. A child of a bitter divorce, a child experiencing early trauma, or a child who has lived in a series of foster homes faces a conflict: Do I screen out painful memories or should I be honest?

The fix: Provide exercises that test writing skills with less painful alternatives. Have the child write a biography of a historical figure in the first person, write about an event in the child’s life or recount a favorite experience in school.

Tell the Story of Your Family

The bias: The goal may be to build self-esteem. This could backfire for a foster or adopted child who feels more and more different from the others as she hears her classmates' family stories. For adopted children in middle childhood who are coping with peer reactions to adoption, this assignment can be very troubling.

The fix: Let students tell their story by bringing in pets, sports uniforms and hobbies.

Celebrate Your Mother or Father

The bias: A Mother's Day or Father's Day project could be difficult for children with single, divorced or widowed parents, or with two sets of parents.

The fix: Broaden the project to honor any woman or man the child knows. Celebrate Family Day to honor people who take care of you. Celebrate Caring Day with themes like "thanking someone who cares for us" or "expressing concern for others". Make gifts or cards for someone the child cares about.

Trace the Genetic Origins of Your Eye Color

The bias: This assumes children are genetically related to their parents or know the genetic facts of their birth parents. Children who don't have this information can't do an assignment on inherited traits, and are made to feel different. It stresses biological connections, when some children might not have any connections with their birth parents.

The fix: Teach genetics with less personal examples.

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