

# *Adoption Awareness in School Assignments*

*A Guide for Parents and Educators*



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*Welcome Home, Forever Child: A Celebration of Children  
Adopted as Toddlers, Preschoolers, and Beyond*

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# *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 labor?
- Were you born before or after the 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. 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. They have no photos of her before age three; a circumstance that is painful for both Maria and her parents. Maria's teacher was aware that she had been adopted as a preschooler, but it didn't occur to him that this assignment would be traumatic for 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 a newborn 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 the child doing different activities.

## **The Need for More Inclusive Assignments**

Several common school assignments can make foster and adoptive children feel left out, uncomfortable, sad, and 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.

There are over 1.5 million adopted children in the United States and close to 600,000 children currently in foster care. The number of adoptions has been increasing each year, with foster care and international adoptions increasing the most. Almost half of all international adoptions and 98% of foster care adoptions involved children over age one.<sup>1</sup>

Adopted children have suffered, at the very least, the loss of their birth parents and extended family. 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 strong grief reactions<sup>2</sup>.



Many teachers are not aware of the negative impact of these projects on foster and adoptive children, unless 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 wider 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.<sup>3</sup> The outline starting on Page 4 of this pamphlet lists some common assignments and the corresponding challenges or problems they present. Solutions are suggested to make the assignments more accessible for all students, regardless of their family structure.

## Addressing a Reluctance to Change

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

- "The school can not cater to every possible situation where a student might be offended." *True. But if an assignment is known to be hurtful to a segment of the school population, and it can be easily modified, the caring and supportive thing to do is 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 feel prefer to keep this information private. Even if parents talk with individual teachers, there is no harm in the school also bringing the issue 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 for the entire year. As instructors tend to repeat lessons and assignments from year to year, it is a case of modifying the assignment once and carrying the modified assignment forward in future years. Master assignments could be distributed to all teachers.*
- "Schools all across the country have been using these assignments for years". *True. Just because everybody does something does not make it right or fair.*

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, can offer alternatives that are appropriate for all students.





# ADOPTION AWARENESS IN SCHOOL ASSIGNMENTS: A Guide for Parents and Educators

by Christine Mitchell

## A. **'Bring a Baby Picture' Assignments or 'Bring Photos at Each Age from Birth'**

1. Problem: A child adopted internationally or from foster care may not have photos of himself before age two, three, or even older.
  - a) 'Bring a baby picture' assignments emphasize an issue that is already extremely painful for children who don't have 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 the details.
2. Solution: Present the assignment as a choice. Bring a picture or pictures:
  - a) As a baby or any younger age OR
  - b) Of the child on various holidays OR doing various activities (sports, dance, chorus, vacations, etc.)

## B. **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.<sup>4</sup> Offer a choice of the following formats (see the fill-in-the-blank worksheets at the end of this pamphlet):
  - a) The Rooted Family Tree, where 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, where the child is in the middle and the outer rings of the circle represent the birth, foster, adoptive and 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.

**C. *Autobiographies and Family History Assignments***

1. Problem: Many adopted children lack information about their early years, or the information is painful and private. These children face a difficult conflict: *Do I screen out painful memories or should I be honest?*<sup>5</sup>
2. Solution: Offer students a choice to write about:
  - a) My Life
  - b) When I was Younger
  - c) My Life in the Past Year
  - d) A Special Event or Person in My Life



**D. *Genetic History Assignments***

1. Problem: Some adopted children do not know where they got their brown eyes, curly hair, or dimples, and this assignment again draws attention to this painful void. Teachers can stop and imagine how it might feel to never know a single other person to whom you are genetically related (as is the case for some adoptees).
2. Solution: Rather than focus a genetic lesson on a child's relationship to his parents and siblings, ask students to choose any biologically related group – other family members, friends, neighbors – to investigate inherited traits.<sup>6</sup>

**E. *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 a country or culture of interest rather than one based on their family.<sup>7</sup>

**F. *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 like the dates of relinquishment, foster care stays, and adoption finalization.
2. Solution: Do not require that the timeline begin from the child's birth, just that it cover a period of time. Alternatively, allow children to create a timeline for a historical or fictional character.<sup>8</sup>

## G. ***Superstar, VIP, Student-of-the-Week Projects***

1. **Problem**: Honoring one student each week and having him share information about him is intended to be a fun activity that helps students get acquainted. But it can be uncomfortable for adopted children who may have limited access to pictures and information about their infancy and early years. Children adopted at an older age may also have very painful memories of their early childhood.
2. **Solution**: Instructors can provide students with a list of many alternatives for the information to be shared, including more innocuous choices such as interests, hobbies, sports, or pets.<sup>9</sup>

## H. ***Positive Adoption Language***

To avoid hurt feelings, teachers can try to use positive adoption language:

1. Instead of 'natural or 'real' mother/father/parents/family, use 'birth' or 'biological'. Adoptive children and parents consider their relationship and 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', say 'birth' or 'biological' child. Adopted children *are* 'our own'.
4. The phrase 'was adopted' is preferable to 'is adopted'.
5. Avoid 'Adopt-a-Animal/Highway/Family'. These terms imply that adoption means paying money for something/someone, and belittles the lifelong bond between parent and child. When possible, try to use 'Sponsor-a-Highway', etc.

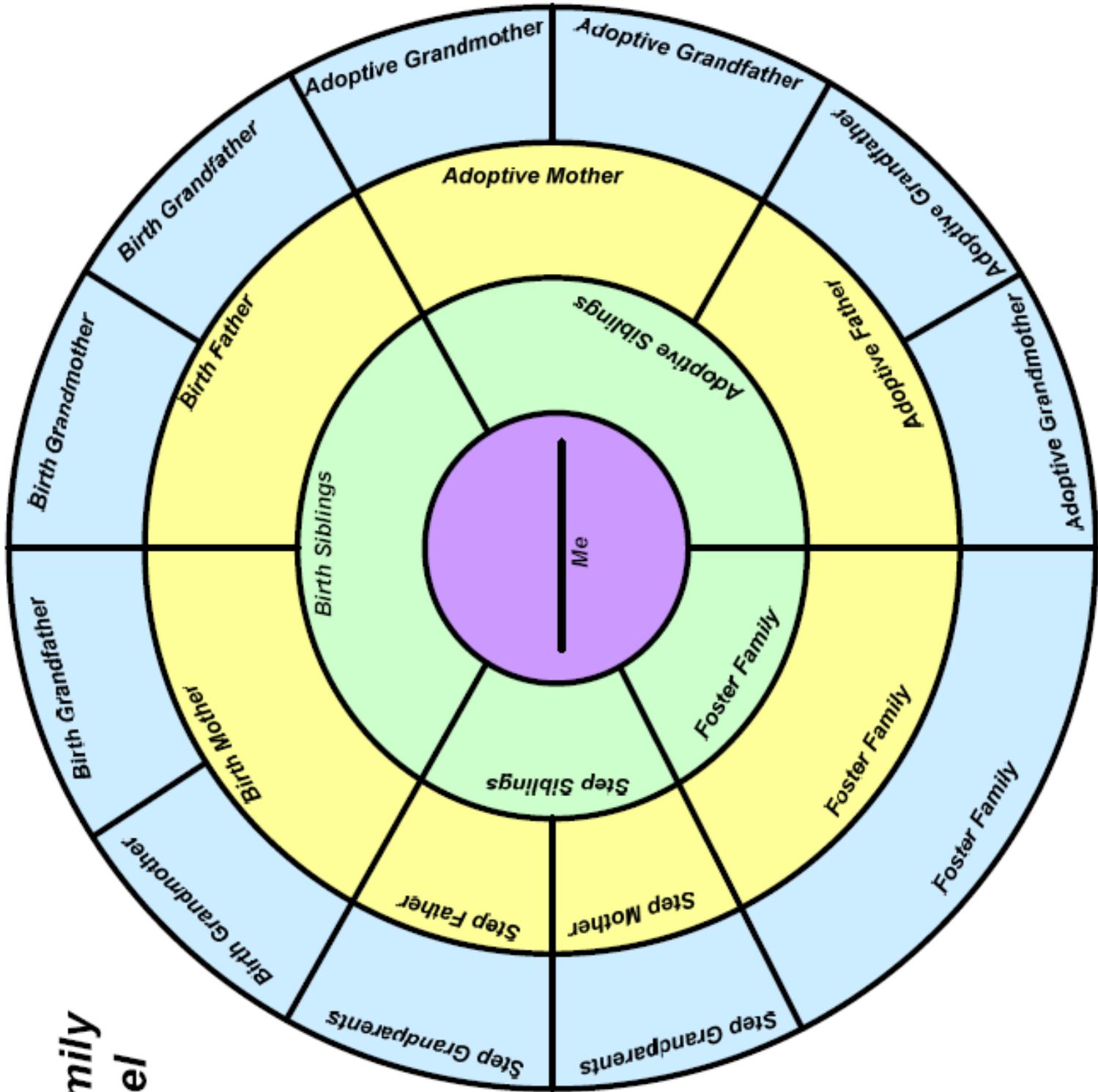
## I. ***Creating an Adoption-Inclusive Classroom Environment***

1. Include books in the school and classroom libraries that have adoption themes or characters who were adopted.
2. Invite an adult adoptee or an adoptive parent to be a guest speaker during the month of November, which is National Adoption Month.
3. Some excellent advice is 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."<sup>10</sup>

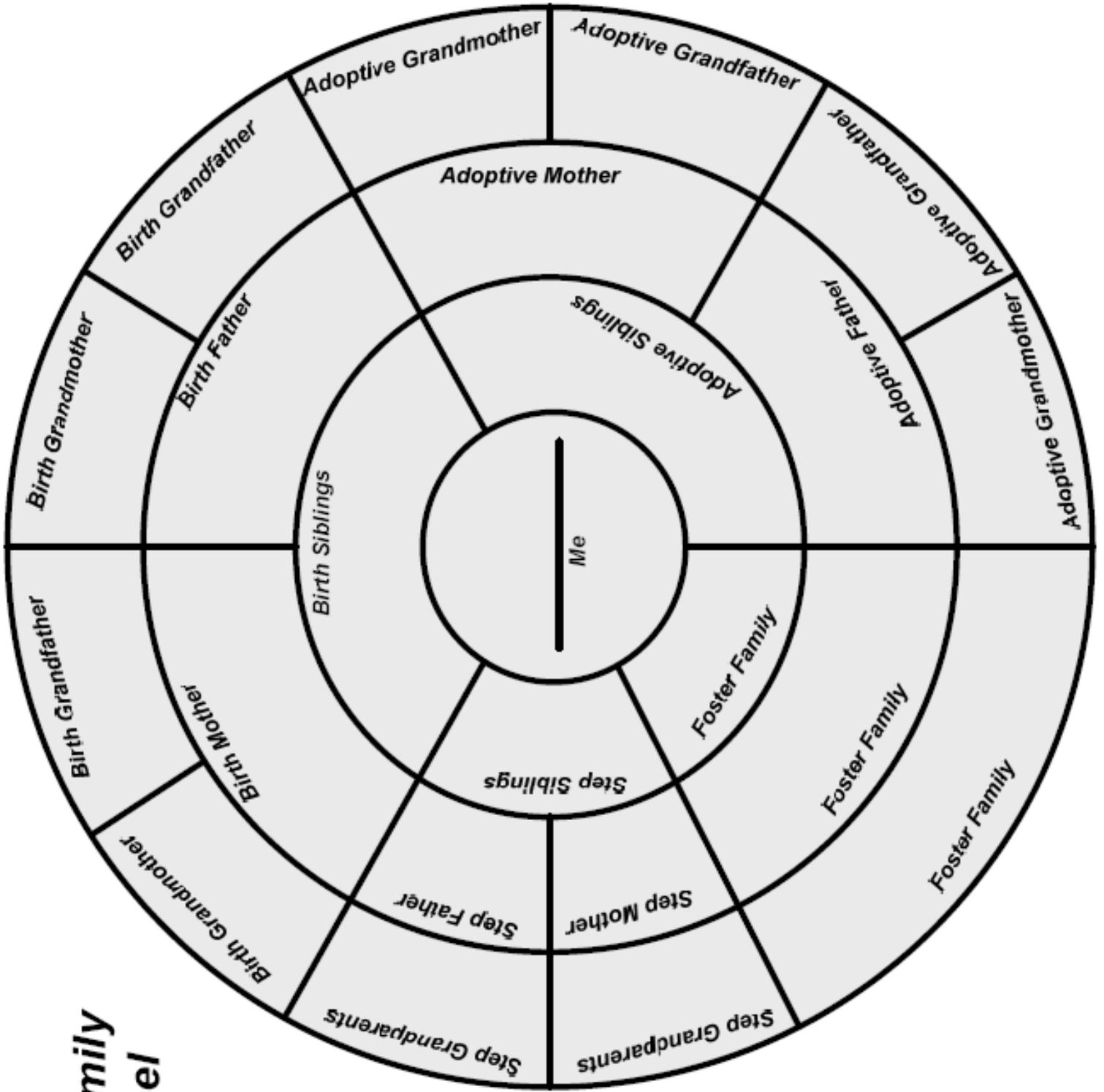


My  
Family  
Tree

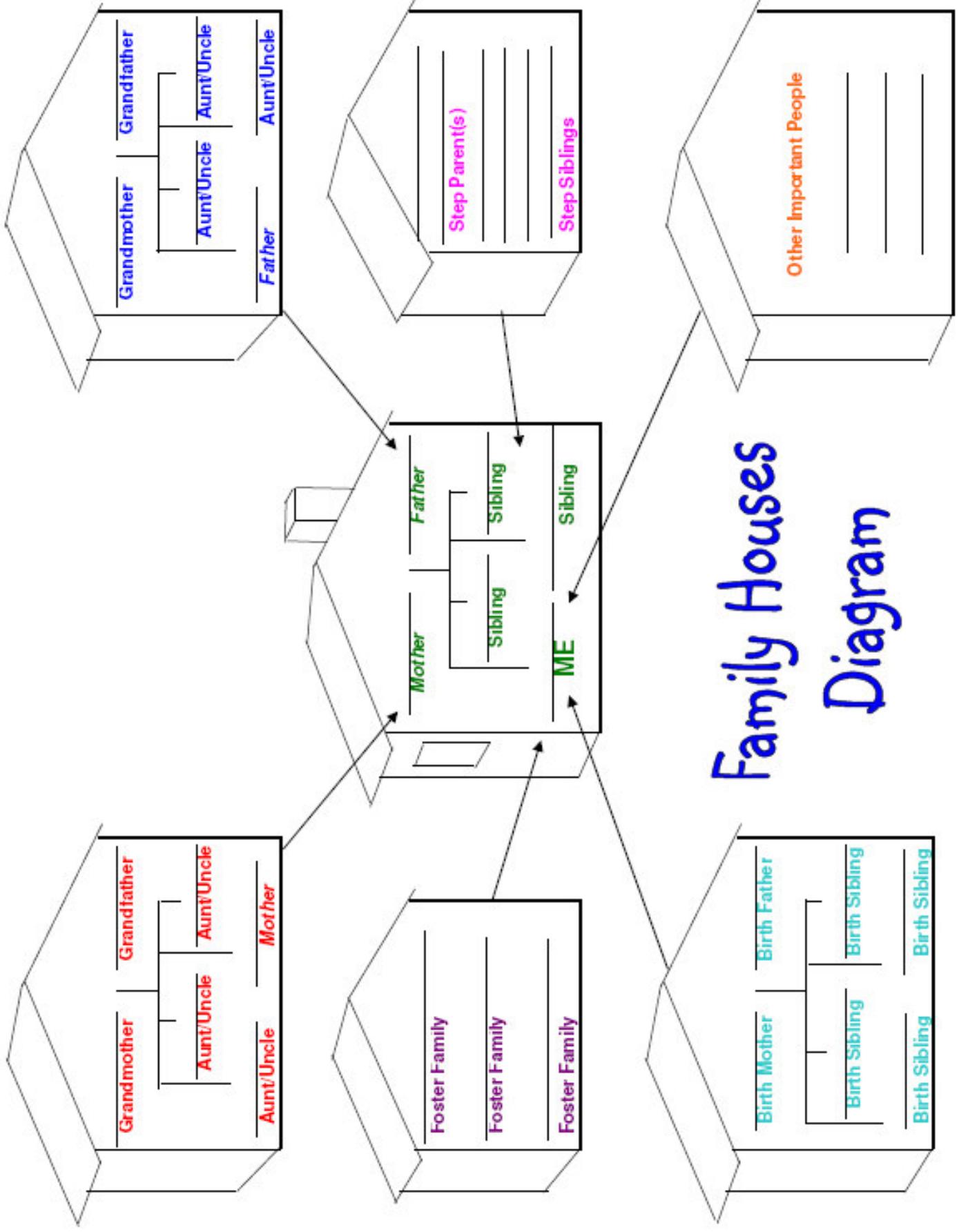
# My Family Wheel



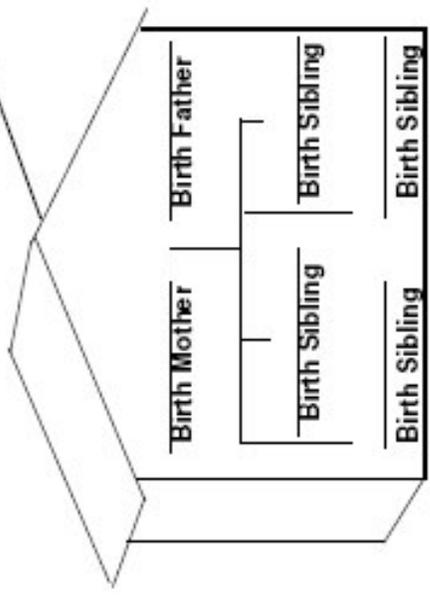
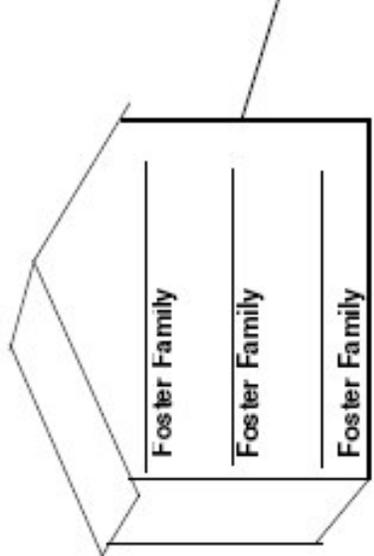
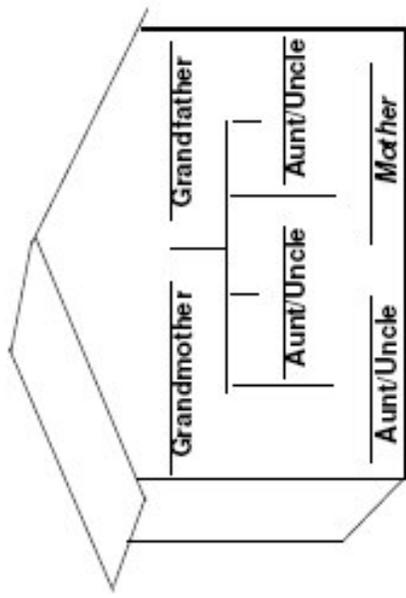
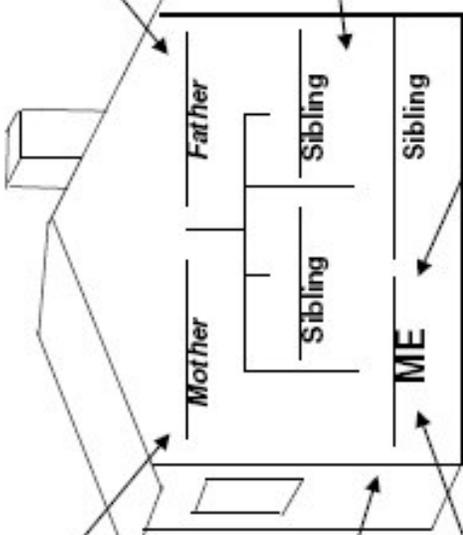
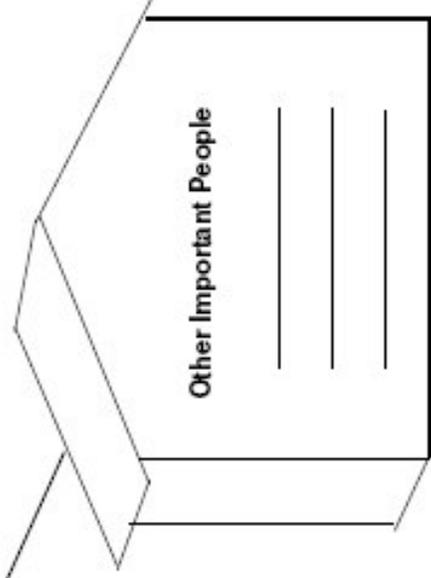
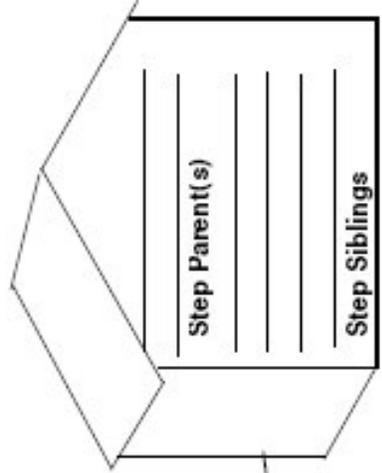
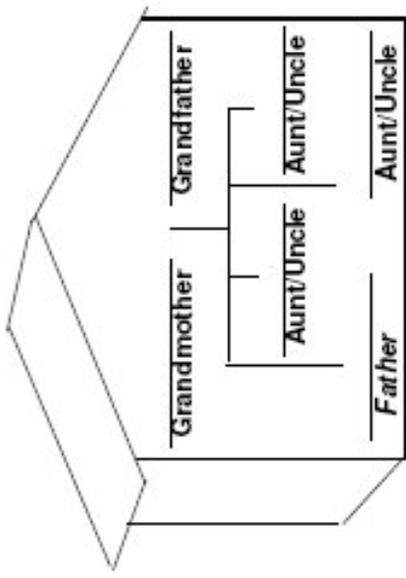
# My Family Wheel



# Family Houses Diagram



# Family Houses Diagram



## **Bibliography**

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- <sup>1</sup> *Overview of Adoption in the United States*, Evan P. Donaldson Adoption Institute, <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview.html#head>
- <sup>2</sup> *Adoption-Competent School Assignments* Fact Sheet, MN ASAP, Minnesota Adoption and Support and Preservations, [www.mnasap.org](http://www.mnasap.org)
- <sup>3</sup> *National Adoption Month Awareness Guide*, NACAC, North American Council on Adoptable Children, <http://www.nacac.org/adoptalk/education.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> *Adoption-Competent School Assignments* Fact Sheet, MN ASAP, Minnesota Adoption and Support and Preservations, [www.mnasap.org](http://www.mnasap.org)
- <sup>5</sup> *Adoption-Competent School Assignments* Fact Sheet, MN ASAP, Minnesota Adoption and Support and Preservations, [www.mnasap.org](http://www.mnasap.org)
- <sup>6</sup> *Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children and How Educators Can Help*, Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, 800/277-8145, [ifapa@ifapa.org](mailto:ifapa@ifapa.org), <http://www.ifapa.org/Brochures/adoption.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> *Tackling Tricky Assignments*, Adoptive Families <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=295>
- <sup>8</sup> *Tackling Tricky Assignments*, Adoptive Families <http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=295>
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- <sup>10</sup> *Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children and How Educators Can Help*, Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, 800/277-8145, [ifapa@ifapa.org](mailto:ifapa@ifapa.org), <http://www.ifapa.org/Brochures/adoption.pdf>

## **Additional Resources**

*Adoption and the Schools: Resources for Parents and Teachers*, by FAIR, Families Adopting in Response, [info@fairfamilies.org](mailto:info@fairfamilies.org), [www.fairfamilies.org](http://www.fairfamilies.org).

*Family Tree and Other Projects*, AdoptionClubHouse.com, Homework Help, [http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org/03\\_homework/04\\_familytree/00\\_overview.html](http://www.adoptionclubhouse.org/03_homework/04_familytree/00_overview.html).

*Adoption Awareness in Our Schools*, The Center for Adoptive Families, a project of Adoptions Together (AT), [caf@adoptionstogether.org](mailto:caf@adoptionstogether.org); or [www.adoptionstogether.org](http://www.adoptionstogether.org).

*S.A.F.E. at School: Support for Adoptive Families by Educators*, The Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc. (CASE), [schoettle@erols.com](mailto:schoettle@erols.com); or [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org).

*Teacher's Guide to Adoption*, Family Helper, [helper@familyhelper.net](mailto:helper@familyhelper.net), [www.familyhelper.net](http://www.familyhelper.net)

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

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