

Facilitator's Guide

MODULE 5

Equipped to Love

Supporting Adoptive
and Foster Families in the Church



“Why” and “How”

MODULE 1

Why children need adoptive families or a temporary home through foster care

- Reasons why children need adoptive families
- Reasons a child may need a temporary home through foster care

How to support and encourage adoptive and foster families

- What you can do to help

MODULE 2

Why interactions with these children need to look different

- What defines a child from a “hard place?”
- What are some potential effects of experiencing these hardships?

How to interact with children who have been adopted and children in care

- “Do’s and don’ts” in interacting with a child who has been adopted or a child in care—The “DON’TS”
- “Do’s and don’ts” in interacting with a child who has been adopted or a child in care—The “DO

MODULE 3

Why these children act differently

- Understanding attachment (attachment cycle)
Delays and differences

MODULE 4

How to meet the unique needs of the children

- Defining and responding to needs

MODULE 5

Why there is a need for overall sensitivity

- Sensitivity to emotional needs of adoptive and foster parents
- Sensitivity toward children

How to show sensitivity toward parents and children

- Language sensitivity
- Respecting boundaries

MODULE 6

Why there is a need for parenting differently

- Understanding differences
- Attachment Parenting vs. Traditional Parenting

How to help families in Attachment Parenting

Connect

Sensitivity to emotional needs of adoptive and foster parents

Play the following game. Give each person in the class a small piece of paper. On the paper, have each person write down one unique thing about him or herself that no one else in the group knows. Place the slips of paper into a container. Seat the class in a large circle. Pass the container around the circle and have each person draw a slip. Take turns reading a clue and have the group vote as to whom they believe the fact is from. Once all of the slips have been read and voted on, allow the group to reveal to whom each fact belongs.

Say: Each of us revealed something about ourselves that we believed that no one else knew. Some of the things that we revealed were very personal and others were not, but in the end, each of us got to decide for ourselves what to reveal and how to reveal it.

Children coming from hard places and their families have unique and often difficult experiences in their past. As we honor each person as being valuable and created in the image of God, we must honor both their right to dignity and their right to privacy.

Facilitator:

Ask the following questions and allow for discussion:

- Q *If you were a child with a difficult past, how might you feel about it?*
- Q What are some things that we do in typical church settings (e.g. Sunday School) that might cause children with complicated or difficult backgrounds to be uncomfortable?

Say: The church MUST be this safe place for all children coming from hard places and their families!

Explore

- ❏ DISTRIBUTE COPIES OF THE LISTENING GUIDE (MODULE 5, HANDOUT 1) AND
- ▶ PLAY THE VIDEO ENTITLED: “WHY THERE IS A NEED FOR OVERALL SENSITIVITY: SENSITIVITY TO EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF ADOPTIVE & FOSTER PARENTS”.

Say: These are things the church should consider – allow for group discussion as to what the specific church can do in recognizing sensitivity and implementing areas of change.

Ask: In light of the invitation we have heard today, what are some things we might say (in a well meaning fashion) that could be considered hurtful by those experiencing infertility and loss or those in the process of adopting or fostering?

Allow time for feedback from the group.

Be sure to review and discuss the following sample comments with the group.

Try to avoid making comments and engaging in the following conversations...

- “Maybe now that you are adopting you will get pregnant – that always seems to happen to people!”
- “Do you think you will have your own children one day?” or “Do you know the mother or father?”
- Be careful not to ask when a family is going to have children or why they do not have children. Remember that it is not necessarily the family’s decision when or if they have children at all – do not assume that it is. These could be very painful questions for them to answer.
- Be careful not to make statements that insinuate the reason the couple does not have children is due to their lack of faith, trust in the Lord, or time spent in prayer.
- For those who have been blessed with many children or the ability to get pregnant very easily, be careful not to make comments like “All we have to do is look at each other to get pregnant” or “You’re so lucky to still have your freedom – enjoy it while it lasts!” or “Do y’all have any kids yet? No? Well, would you like mine!?” Remember that many couples you see without children would happily trade anything to be in your shoes; to them these flippant and meant-to-be-funny-and-harmless comments can be immensely painful.

Facilitator:

Share the information below with those in the group. Allow a few minutes for any further discussion.

Great sensitivity is needed.

- Remember to stay positive and encouraging, without giving false hope
- Make an effort to ask and show you care how someone is doing
 - Always follow up with anything you offer to do. If you say you are going to pray, then pray. Let the family know you are praying when you see them. You can also send a text, a card, or a phone call to let them know you are praying or thinking about them.

We hope that after talking through these topics, you are able to see the reasons why sensitivity in adoption and foster care is so imperative. Our desire is that each of you learns to be more conscious of your words and actions, the message they are sending, and how that message could be interpreted.

We want to equip you to love, care for, and serve each other well and to remind you that every person in your congregation's journey will look different and we need to show empathy and respect to one another along the way.

Remind your church body regularly of our ultimate purpose as Christ's followers – this is to glorify Him, to exalt His name in all things, to know Him, to trust Him, to point others to Him – no matter where we find ourselves in our individual journeys, regardless of our present circumstances, these things are of chief importance and can be our focus. Deliver messages (ranging from the pulpit to everyday conversations) that reflect and drive this home. Help one another keep our perspectives in the right place by pointing each other to what we were designed to do: to know Him and make Him known.

Sensitivity towards children

Facilitator:

Cover the information below.

- Show sensitivity to the emotional needs of the children – adoption and foster care is confusing. Depending on the children's physical and developmental ages, their understanding of their experiences may be limited.

- Specifically pertaining to adoption, the whole question of what is a “real” parent needs to be explored. The National Council for Adoption coined this question in their Consider the Possibilities curriculum.

Facilitator:

So what is a real parent? Allow group to discuss.

Talk through the following...

Unfortunately the worldly view of real parent vs. adoptive parent sends a very negative message to the child. Children who hear “Is that your real mom/dad?” may doubt their status as “real child” in the families that God, in His perfect design, provided for them. (*“Debunking Myths” by Traci Newell, Education Coordinator at Lifeline Children’s Services*)

In looking at the covenant relationship of the spiritual adoption that ALL who are believers in Christ Jesus experience as our standard, what are similarities between that adoption and an earthly adoption?

- It is real,
- It is binding,
- It is eternal,
- It offers inheritance,
- It gives a name,
- It was established before time!

As the Body of Christ, we MUST faithfully point families and children back to our heavenly adoption through Christ!

Ask: Given what we’ve learned so far in this series about what children who have been adopted or are in foster care have been through, why might these children act in a self-protective manner or try to keep people at arm’s length? Discuss.

- Since the care these children have received up to this point in their lives likely has not been consistent, having caring adults of any kind in their lives is probably foreign and feels unsafe and/or invasive (at least initially). These children have learned from their past life experiences that you are safer when you expect people to abandon you. Having that expectation minimizes hurt and disappointment for them; it is a survival technique that allows them to feel protected and secure because they feel like they are in control.

- Approach these children with grace and understand that what we see as negative behavior is functional in some way for them. Have the courage to engage with these children in creative and appropriate ways instead of allowing their negative behaviors to keep you away and reinforce what these children already believe to be true.

Ask: Would you expect a child who has been adopted or is in foster care to act in a grateful manner toward those who care for him? Discuss.

- Do not assume the child is relieved, grateful, excited, or appreciative that he has been adopted or that he is in a foster home where he is no longer experiencing abuse or neglect.
- Adoption is a life-altering, difficult transition for these children with much loss involved. Foster care is the same, remember the goal is reunification – these children are longing for their birth parents and they do not have the certainty that this move is permanent, the timeframes for them are always uncertain and no one can give them concrete answers.

Brainstorm the possible losses that children in these circumstances have endured.

Ask: Why might it be important for those serving as caregivers (e.g. Sunday school teachers) for these children to be careful asking a child about his family or his past?

- Caregivers who are unfamiliar with the child’s history should be careful asking the child about his family. Understand that you could receive all kinds of responses.
 - For some children, not being asked about their family, if you are asking other children about theirs, could be difficult. They may feel as if you are singling them out as different when they’d prefer to fit in.
 - For other children, being asked a question pertaining to family could be a trigger for them or may bring up painful memories, such as a prior negative experience or the fact that they haven’t been able to see their family in a long time. Recognize that for a child in care, when you mention family this may translate as “birth family”.
- Do not make any assumptions about the child’s prior experiences, what we see as negative or positive. Keep in mind that you do not know the details of a child’s history. Be sensitive to the fact that they may have experienced horrible things like abuse or trauma. On the flip side, children may have been deprived of the opportunity to experience many things that we see as “common childhood experiences”.

- For example, don't ask questions like "what did you get for Christmas last year?" The reality is that many of these children may have never received a Christmas gift before.

- 📄 **DISTRIBUTE COPIES** of the Listening Guide (Module 5, Handout 2) and
- ▶ **PLAY THE VIDEO ENTITLED:** "How to Show Sensitivity Toward Adoptive and Foster Families: Language Sensitivity".

Apply

- 📄 **CUT OUT THE SCENARIOS** from the handout Common Terms (Module 5, Handout 3).
- 👤 **DIVIDE THE CLASS INTO GROUPS OF TWO OR THREE.** Give each team a piece of paper with the common term.

Say: All the things we have learned in this section can be directly applied as modifications to the church's regular ministry programming. Based upon what we have talked about in this session, what changes would you recommend to these typical church programs to better ministry to adoptive and foster families?

Once finished, allow groups to share their ideas.

Here are a few ideas to supplement those from your class:

1. **Set aside and designate a location for families to use during services.** This space should have sermon audio available so that they are still able to listen and learn. This space should inspire calm and not be over-stimulating. Bright colors, strong lighting, and loud volumes should be avoided.
2. **Mother's Day/Father's Day** – acknowledge that even though these are times of celebration, these days can also be painful reminders. Broaden your acknowledgement of this day to include those who have lost mothers and fathers, those who long to be mothers and fathers, those who are presently mothers and fathers, those who have placed a child for adoption, those who will be mothers and fathers one day, those who are expecting a child, those who are mothers and fathers for this season, those who have lost a child, those who are mothers and fathers who are separated or estranged for one reason or another from their children, etc. Assure all of these populations in your congregation that the Church is beside them in their journey, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. (*Ecclesiastes...*)

3. **Throw showers** – Include foster parents and adoptive parents when planning showers for friends and family. They still have needs – including a need to feel celebrated, encouraged, and provided for.
4. **Rename “Baby Dedication” to something more inclusive** – e.g. Baby and Child Dedication, Child Dedication, Parent Commitment, or Parent Covenant.
5. **Sensory environment** – have the following available in a children’s play area: fidget toys, bubble gum, pillows, soft stuffed animals/blankets, calming music, putty, stress balls, rocking chairs. Avoid loud noises, bright colors, strong lights, and over-stimulation.
6. **Dietary needs** – Avoid large amounts of sugar, provide healthy snacks when possible; sour and spicy foods are alerting, sweet flavors are calming. Make sure to give frequent snacks and help these children stay hydrated.
7. **Work to create as calm an environment as possible in your church** – one that feels comforting, safe, and protective. We desire that these children develop a positive view of church; for them to be able to do this, church needs to feel stress-free and safe.
8. **Record the sermon and distribute it** to families who are “cocooning” if your church does not have a podcast of the sermon available online or a live stream option.
9. **Prepare childcare workers for adoptive and foster parents to need to gradually leave their child for longer periods of time in the classroom.** There will be times the parents need to stay with their child and don’t need to be ushered out or discouraged from staying when they feel they need to do so. Encourage childcare workers to establish with each adoptive or foster parent at what point that parent wants to be contacted to come and intervene. Is it when the child begins to cry? Is it when the child hits another? Know and honor the determining factor for contacting the parent.
10. **Closet** – clothes, diapers, shoes, car seats, cribs, baby gates, outlet covers, fire extinguishers, escape ladder
11. **Extending resources to birth families** such as allowing your church’s gym or craft room to be used for visitation between children in foster care and their birth families.
12. **Develop programs for adults that do not revolve around children or parenting.** Intentionally create women’s and men’s groups outside of parents’ groups. These

adults need to feel that there are programs for them, too – that not all things for folks their age involve parenting topics/focus. Make parenting less a norm or presumed stage of life (i.e. you can be 40+ and childless, with a life full of other good things – that should not be seen as weird, wrong, or something you feel you have to defend).

Pray

- Pray for the church to grow in their understanding of the importance of sensitivity.
- Pray the church will be willing to implement areas of care that may require changing traditional settings.
- Pray for those in your faith family who experience (past, present, or future) loss and/or infertility. Pray that they would know the Lord as He who is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).
- Pray for the foster and adoptive families in your church to receive God's discernment and wisdom in ministering to their children on a daily basis.
- Pray God will bring healing to these children and that they will find their identity in Him.
- Pray that the Lord gives grace and patience to foster and adoptive families as they seek to educate those around them. Pray that Satan receives no victory as He does His best to steal, kill, and destroy the good and the unity in the Body of Christ consistent with God's character and purposes by pitting believers against one another and putting them on the defensive.

Sensitivity to Emotional Needs of Adoptive and Foster Parents

Key areas of sensitivity:

- Different phases of the adoption or foster process
- Infertility and loss

Three key times during the adoption and fostering process that need more sensitivity:

1. The waiting period before a child enters the home

2. When a child first enters the home.

3. Foster parents – when a child in their care exits the home.

Sensitivity to Emotional Needs of Adoptive and Foster Parents

Key areas of _____:

- Different phases of the _____ or _____ process
- _____ and _____

Three key times during the adoption and fostering process that need more sensitivity:

1. The _____ before a child enters the home

2. When a child _____ the home.

3. Foster parents – when a child in their care _____.

Language Sensitivity Towards Adoptive and Foster Families

BIRTH MOTHERS AND BIRTH FAMILIES

WHAT NOT TO SAY	APPROPRIATE ALTERNATIVE
Is she going to give up her baby? Is she going to put up her child for adoption?	Place her child for adoption Make an adoption plan
Did she decide to keep her baby?	Did she choose to parent?
Why did the birthmother not want the baby?	*Don't make assumptions*

FOSTER CARE

WHAT NOT TO SAY	APPROPRIATE ALTERNATIVE
Foster child Foster kid	A child in care, a child in foster care A child who is placed with you
I could never do what you do. I could never give the child back. I could never love a child and let him go.	Thank you for what you do.
Aren't you worried about your own kids? What might happen to your biological children?	What a great learning opportunity for your children.

ADOPTION LANGUAGE

WHAT NOT TO SAY	APPROPRIATE ALTERNATIVE
Is he yours? Is he your own? Is this your real child? Which one is yours?	Is he your biological child?
Real parents.	Biological parents Birth parents
Are you his real parents?	Are you the child's biological parent?
Are they siblings?	Are your children biological siblings?
Do you have children (or do you want to have children) of your own? Do you have (or do you want) your own children?	Do you have biological children as well?
Where did you get your baby?	I'd love to hear the story of your adoption or foster care journey.
What is he? (nationality)	Where was your child born?
Was it expensive? How much did he cost?	I'd love to hear how families typically fund their adoptions and what type of financial commitment could be expected?
He is so lucky.	I am so thankful that God ordained this adoption.
I'm going to take you home with me!	*Don't say anything*
Normal family, Natural family	Families with only biological children.
The child IS adopted.	The child WAS adopted.

Common Terms/Programs

Mother's Day/Father's Day Observance

Baby Showers

Baby Dedication Services

Worship Service

Sunday School

Clothing Closet

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