M1L2 Guiding Principles that Support Effective Mental Health Practices

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction
Welcome to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Child Welfare Professionals. This is Module 1: A Case for Adoption Competency, Lesson 2: Guiding Principles that Support Effective Mental Health Practices.

2. Guiding Principles

2.1 Guiding Principles
We each have personal experiences, beliefs, values and personal and professional ethics that have a definite impact on the way we do our work. The following are guiding principles, woven throughout this curriculum, that are critical in your work to achieve the best success for the children and families you serve.

2.2 Domains that Impact Practice
We invite you to think about how these principles fit with your views and how they guide both Child Welfare and Mental Health practice with children and families moving toward or having achieved adoption and guardianship.

In this lesson, we will discuss principles related to the following domains that impact practice:
- Principles Impact Practice
- Policies and Procedures
- Parents as Partners in Practice
- Practice Impacts People

We have organized this lesson in a way that allows for you to view these principles in an order that is relevant to you and, in the future, to revisit these principles as you consider the different challenges you face in supporting children and families. Click on each of the puzzle pieces to find out more.
3. Principles Impact Practice

3.1 Principles Impact Practice
Some core principles reinforce what we have in common as people even as our journeys are different. They remind us that while our experiences may shape us, they don’t define us; and, our interactions can be powerful agents for change.

3.2 Links to Principles that Impact Practice
Click the “Next” button to hear more about the principles that impact practice.

3.3 Healing Happens in Nurturing and Trusting Relationships
Healing from adverse or traumatic early childhood experiences, including the experience of being separated from birth parents doesn’t happen on its own. Children need stable, nurturing family relationships with parents or guardians they trust in order to begin the healing process. This happens best within a family setting, ideally with extended families or with fictive kin where they already have well-established relationships. When that can’t happen - it’s our job to find a permanent family for every child, who can provide stability and the commitment of a safe and nurturing parent-child relationship, as well as the support of extended family and community. And then, the healing can begin.

3.4 Children Process Their Story Through a Developmental Lens
An interesting fact about adoption and guardianship work is that there are predictable developmental phases for adoptive and guardianship families that are different than for birth families. A child’s understanding of what it means to be adopted is very different at age 4 than at age 10 or 16 and it’s our job to help parents understand how children process information about their story at various points in their life and give them the tools to communicate their child’s story in meaningful ways.

3.5 Children Process Their Story Through a Developmental Lens Interaction
Introduction: Click on each of the tabs to learn more about how children process their story.
Developmental Phases: There are predictable developmental phases in adoptive and guardianship families that are different than in birth families.

Changing Perception: One example is the child’s changing perception of adoption at different developmental stages, and the growing awareness of what their adoption means to them-through their lens, not an adult’s.

Realization: At some point the child realizes, “If I was adopted, then someone chose not to parent me or was not allowed to parent me,” and all that this realization implies.

Understanding and Education: Child Welfare Professionals must help parents understand these developmental stages and how children begin to process the unique aspects of their story. We must educate parents about the key elements of the child’s story and give parents the tools to help communicate this information with their child.

3.6 New Challenges
In all adoptions and guardianships, new challenges are brought into the existing family dynamics, not the least of which are the core issues that the adopted child brings: attachment, loss and grief, trauma, and identity; and the impact of race, ethnicity and diversity. Adoptive and guardianship parents may experience some of these same core issues. When you add relationships with the adopted child’s birth family-you have yet another layer or dimension to the nature of family formation, expanding the family exponentially.

3.7 Secure Attachments
When you hear story after story about the terrible things that children have endured or you find out that one of the children on your caseload has blown yet another placement, it’s easy to think that the damage has been done. But the great news about this work and the importance of learning about attachment, loss and grief and trauma is realizing that with proper therapeutic treatments and the support and persistence of stable, nurturing parents or guardians, secure attachments can be formed and healing can happen. As long as we believe in this principle, planning for a child’s future holds hope for a positive outcome.
3.8 Knowing What Happened Matters
Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that if we talk about what has happened or is happening in the life of a child - we cause more hurt.

But, that’s really not the case. In fact, we can argue that the opposite is true - especially when it comes to helping children understand why they’re not able to be with their family.

Knowing their own story is often the key to making sense of unexplained feelings, thoughts, fears and triggers. It reduces anxiety and uncertainty and provides the basis for healthy adjustment.

An important part of our job and the ability of children to heal - is helping them put the pieces of their life puzzle together.

3.9 Connections Matter Reflection
Prior to learning about the importance of connections to children coming into foster care, think about and respond to the following question. Click “Submit” when you are finished. When children come into foster care, what are some of the things they lose?

3.10 Connections Matter
Can you imagine what it would feel like to wake up tomorrow and have lost all connection to the people you live with and love the most? That’s essentially what happens to young people who come into foster care. We need to acknowledge that while removing a child from his family may be in his best interest from a safety perspective, it doesn’t guarantee his well-being. Connections to parents, siblings, and extended family, and the things we are familiar with, are essential to all of us. Whether or not those people are physically present or even biologically connected, they are emotionally present. Children are thinking about them, worrying about them, and wondering about them. So, we need to look for ways to help children honor and safely maintain their connections and relationships.
3.11 Diversity Plays a Significant Role
Issues of diversity - including race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation and gender identity all have a unique role in adoption and guardianship practice - particularly so when the adoption or guardianship is a trans-racial or trans-cultural one. Because these issues can further complicate the adoption or guardianship experience, it's incredibly important that you have an awareness of how they impact your day to day practice and the lives of the children and families you serve. With that comes another obligation, and that is for you to be aware of your own biases and views. That's the only way to assure that you provide services and supports that are truly in the best interest of all the children and families you serve.

4. Policies and Procedures
4.1 Policies and Procedures Impact Practice
Principles are more than words on paper - they should be infused in the policies, procedures and processes that guide our day to day work with children and families.

4.2 Links to Policies and Procedures
Click the “Next” button to hear more about how policies and procedures impact practice.

4.3 Integrating the Child and Family’s History Into Assessment
A comprehensive assessment is the foundation for developing effective case plans and making good placement decisions with the children and families you serve. Click “Child” and “Parent” below to explore what makes a thorough and comprehensive assessment for each.

Child:
Introduction: What factors are important to consider when assessing a child prior to placement?

Experiences: Information about the child's past experiences

Needs: Thorough review of psychological, social and educational needs

Background information: As much birth family and cultural information as possible
Summary: The assessment is not the time to gloss over details. For example, saying that a child was sexually abused is too vague to be of use. However, saying that the child lived with her offender and was sexually abused weekly for two years shows a much more accurate picture of the child and the impact of those experiences on her.

Parent:
Introduction: What factors are important to consider when assessing parents prior to placement?

Past Experiences: A thorough review of their past experiences

Information: Psychosocial information

Ability: Their ability to parent a child with particular challenges and needs.

4.4 Strengths-Based Services
Our work with children must occur in the context of the family system. Children don’t live or act in isolation - there is a dynamic interplay with all family members. Click on “Family System” and “Child Welfare Professional” to learn how they fit into the framework.

Family System: Parents or guardians need to be involved in their child’s case planning and treatment planning. This is true even when children are placed out of home, in which case the foster or adoptive parents or guardians are essential partners in the child’s plan of care.

Child Welfare Professional: It’s also important that we focus on strengths. We hear a lot nowadays about the importance of being strengths-based but the fact is that change happens best when individual and family strengths are recognized and when they’re capitalized on to effect change. Think of parents as the agents of change and you, the Child Welfare Professional, as the facilitator of that change. This idea lends itself to empowering the family to take the lead in creating the healing environment for their child.
4.5 Supportive Network  
All of us need caring, supportive people (what we call a kinship network) in order to be successful, and this is certainly true for the families and the children we serve. The kinship network should be defined by the family. It may include relatives, friends, members of the faith community, and others the parents rely on. It should also include significant people from the child’s past: Safe birth family members, teachers or coaches, former foster parents or social workers. An important part of your work with families early on is to help them identify, connect with and build on their natural supports to provide needed support when the family needs it most.

5. Parents as Partners in Practice  
5.1 Parents as Partners in Practice  
If it is true that adoption is a journey, then parents are captains of the ship. Our goal is not just for families to be forever - but to be nurturing, strong, and stable. For that to happen, we must help parents and guardians understand and prepare for their role, and we need to be there to support them through the challenges.

5.2 Links to Parents as Partners  
Click the “Next” button to hear more about parents as partners in practice.

5.3 Reciprocal Process  
Think about how overwhelming it must be for a child or teenager to join a new family and try to fit in. There are new routines, different foods, new expectations, and the list goes on. The willingness of parents to be flexible in the process of becoming a family can have a significant impact on that child’s adjustment. Little things like encouraging parents to find out their child’s favorite foods, and bed time rituals will show the child that the family is willing to meet them halfway. You have an important job in preparing parents to embrace their child as an individual, in helping them set realistic expectations and helping them understand that becoming a family is a reciprocal, two-way process.
5.4 Parents Provide the Healing Environment
Children are the products of their experiences and they often bring negative “survival” behaviors to their new family. Some children have special needs, behavior challenges, mental health or substance abuse disorders. Whatever the situation, parents provide the healing environment for their children. There’s a saying in child welfare practice that a child’s trust in new parents cannot be fully established until the child has been in a family for longer than their longest previous placement. If this is true, then we must help parents see past the immediate, and look toward the future, continuing to provide unconditional nurture that will enable trust to build, attachments to form and positive behaviors to emerge in time. As a Child Welfare Professional, you provide the bridge to healing through your preparation work with parents - by supporting them in learning new ways to parent their child, helping them set realistic expectations, and supporting them through the therapeutic process.

5.5 Unresolved Parental Grief
People come to the decision to adopt or serve as guardians for many reasons. Some of these involve grief that is still unresolved; for example, grief around infertility, loss of children, or the parent’s own traumatic childhood experiences. It’s really important in your work with adoptive parents and guardians that you understand their motivation, you assess for unresolved grief, and you help parents understand how a child’s behavior can trigger their own emotions, no matter how well they think they have resolved the grief. Imagine an adoptive mother whose unresolved grief about her own infertility is triggered when her adoptive, teenage daughter becomes pregnant. An already stressful situation becomes more so because the mother isn’t prepared for her anger and feelings of resentment. Parents can’t provide the healing environment for their children if they haven’t done their own healing. While we can’t anticipate every eventuality, we need to assess and discuss this upfront with parents; and, when necessary, connect parents to resources to help them do their own healing work.
5.6 Unresolved Parental Grief Reflection
As a child welfare worker, how would you help a mother who was going through the issues discussed previously, so that her struggles do not negatively impact her daughter?

- Affirm her feelings
- Normalize her experience
- Refer her for mental health services
- All of the above

5.7 Unresolved Parental Grief Response 1
Actually, all three responses are appropriate. Click “Next” to hear some responses that a Child Welfare Professional might use with a parent who is struggling with unresolved parental grief.

5.8 Unresolved Parental Grief Response 2
Correct, all three responses are appropriate. Click “Next” to hear some responses that a Child Welfare Professional might use with a parent who is struggling with unresolved parental grief.

5.9 Unresolved Parental Grief Feedback
Introduction: Use the controls below or click each of the tabs to view some of the things you could say to the mother suffering from unresolved grief.

Affirm Her Feelings: "I hear that you are feeling resentful. It must be hard to have so many of these emotions."

Normalize Her Experience: "It makes sense that these feelings of sadness and anger are surfacing now that your daughter has shared her pregnancy."

Refer Her for Mental Health Services: "I think it would be really helpful for you to have someone help you process these messages. I urge you to consider seeing a therapist."

Summary: Again, all three would be appropriate ways to respond to the mother who is struggling with unresolved parental grief.
5.10 Seeking Help
An important part of your work with adoptive and guardianship families is normalizing the need for help. Seeking help is a strength we should welcome and honor; and we should encourage families to reach out early - and not wait until problems reach a crisis level. Wise parents know they don’t have all the answers; and, they know that being an “experienced parent” is no indication that their parenting style will necessarily fit the needs of a new child. Asking for help is not a sign of failure - we want parents to reach out for help and we must be ready to provide support and appropriate referrals when they do.

6. Practice Impacts People
6.1 Practice Impacts People
In the grind of day to day work, it’s easy to forget the power we hold over others - especially when we look to supervisors, managers and the courts to make the big decisions. But the reality is that what you say and do each day makes a difference in the lives of the children and families you serve.

6.2 Links to Practice
Click the “Next” button to hear more about how practice impacts people.

6.3 What You Do Impacts the Child
Introduction: In your work with children, everything you do has a potential impact, positive or negative, on their mental health.

Choices: The choices you make can minimize or compound trauma for them. For example, explaining to a child why foster care placement was needed can reduce the anxiety and fear that comes with being separated from their family.

Openness: Simply being open with children about where they’re going and why can establish trust and help with their adjustment to change. On the other hand, moving children when they’re in crisis can reinforce the belief that they are bad and contributes to their poor adjustment.

Quality: The quality of your relationship with children matters. Being authentic and doing what you say you will is crucial to help to build the trust that is so important to children.
Help: And because every interaction or decision you make can have the ability to impact the child’s well-being, it’s also important to use your supervisor and team when making critical decisions. This will help make sure you are considering all options and impacts on the children you serve.

6.4 Commit to Preventing Additional Trauma
Losing one’s birth family may be the most traumatic event a child will experience, no matter how difficult the circumstances were. Your commitment to addressing these losses with children openly, honestly and with support will help them to express their feelings. Likewise, reducing their number of moves while in foster care (especially moves made while they’re in crisis), can minimize the trauma they experience. Every unnecessary or unplanned move disrupts the child’s attachments, developmental progress, and self-esteem, which is why it is so important that you use your influence to minimize moves. Now, it’s not uncommon for the first placement in foster care to be a short-term or emergency placement. However, the next placement should be a concurrent planning placement in which the family is willing to be that child’s permanent family if reunification doesn’t happen. There are two important exceptions to this practice that must be noted. In cases where safe, available relatives were not known or identified for the initial placement, they should be considered for the next concurrent planning placement. For eligible American Indian children, a home that is not compliant with the Indian Child Welfare Act should never intentionally be used with permanency in mind. This practice can set the child and the family up for unnecessary trauma.

The three links on this page connect to news articles about a controversial case that highlights the importance of understanding the role of the Indian Child Welfare Act in child placement and the possible consequences for children’s mental health due to additional trauma.

- Los Angeles Times ‘It’s not supposed to be this way’: Why it’s getting more difficult for foster families
- Time Magazine Inside the Agonizing Custody Fight Over Six-Year-Old Lexi
- Indian Country Today Media Network Lexi to Remain with Utah Family in Appeals Court Ruling


http://time.com/4269542/inside-the-agonizing-custody-fight-over-lexi-page/
6.5 Communication Fosters Healthy Adjustment
This is true for both children and their parents or guardians. Child Welfare Professionals must learn language that will enable them to speak honestly with children about what has happened to them, and be able to help children and their parents manage the pain of difficult or missing information. Parents and children will likely both need guidance to navigate the changes in family dynamics that result when a new family is formed. Your ability to have open, honest conversations about what to expect and what the changes and challenges are likely to be will serve the family well.

7. Wrapping Up
7.1 Wrapping Up
We invite you to refer back to these guiding principles and revisit them as you consider the different challenges you face in supporting children and families. Use these principles to guide decisions on behalf of the children you serve and the prospective parents you are assessing for them. When you reach those times when you feel “stuck” and you are at a loss for an answer about what to do, come back to these and see if they give you the insight you need to move in a positive direction.

As we move through the training, these principles will be repeated in the lessons ahead. Keep them in mind, and more importantly, consider how your work lines up with them. We hope that you will see how important they are and will align your beliefs and practices with them.

7.2 Your Toolbox
Drag and drop the guiding principles that you will use in your practice into the toolbox.
• Commit to preventing additional trauma
• Believe that experiences don’t define children
• Engage in open, honest communication
• Respect the role of diversity
• Partner with parents
• Be strengths based
• Help families build a supportive network
• Know that what you do impacts children
7.3 Conclusion
Congratulation! You have completed Lesson 2 of Module 1.

In the next lesson, we will focus on adoption and guardianship options today and how practices have changed.