An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals

ACT:
An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals©

An 8-session (48 hour) Curriculum designed for child welfare and mental health professionals

ACT is a comprehensive adoption and permanency curriculum that provides intensive practice and clinically informed training to adoption and permanency professionals, and community-based therapists and service providers. The curriculum expands the application of techniques and knowledge from related fields, such as education, mental health, and neurobiology to the practice of adoption and relative guardianship.

ACT is designed to advance and inform adoption practice, expand the pool of qualified child welfare and mental health providers available to families, integrate permanency practice across an array of programs, and engage and retain qualified professional staff in adoption and post-permanency services.

ACT can also help organizations serving children to develop core competencies in adoption and permanency, and provide them with a cohesive framework that will enable them to improve and standardize their programs with shared, quality knowledge and a commitment to integrated practice principles.

ACT was developed in 1992 and has been refined and field-tested to more than 7,000 professionals over 20 years. Kinship Center attributes the successful outcomes of its programs and <2% disruption rate historically to the impact of ACT on the skills and commitment of its staff to creating and supporting permanent families.
Rationale for the Curriculum

Adoption and permanency create issues that are both complex and lifelong for children, adoptive parents and caregivers, and birth families. In addition, children in the child welfare system are more likely to have experienced trauma than other children, resulting in emotional and behavioral problems that create additional strain for adoptive parents and caregivers. The serious shortage of pre- and post-permanency service providers that fully appreciate these complex issues frequently leads to families feeling isolated, frustrated and hopeless, often leading to disrupted adoptions or foster care placements, and children being placed in group homes or residential treatment. Foster and adopted youth comprise a high percentage of the children in group homes and residential treatment programs, making it essential for administrators and staff in those programs to also develop knowledge and techniques that will increase their ability to more effectively serve this population.

Overview of the Curriculum

- Session 1: Permanence in Context
- Session 2: Core Issues
- Session 3: The Art and Science of Attachment
- Session 4: A Developmental Perspective
- Session 5: Family Constellation Challenges
- Session 6: Supporting the Permanent Family
- Session 7: Tools for Skilled Practice
- Session 8: Diversity, Healing, and the Family

1. **Session 1: Permanence in Context**
   This session provides an introduction to the curriculum and the facilitators, and gives background information on the development of ACT. This session begins the adoption and permanence knowledge and the skill building content, focusing on policy and practice challenges for permanence in a child’s life. The theoretical framework of this curriculum, the *Seven Core Issues in Adoption*, is introduced, with time spent on the first three issues, Loss, Rejection and Guilt & Shame. Emphasis is on the unique issues that the adopted person, birth family, and permanent family face in the lifelong process of adoption and permanency.

2. **Session 2: Core Issues**
   Session two continues the adoption knowledge and skill-building with further exploration of the *Seven Core Issues in Adoption*, discussing Grief, Identity, Intimacy and Mastery/Control. The clinical practices that are the focus of ACT have evolved over time, and adoption from a historical perspective is reviewed. This session introduces several practice interventions that professionals can use in their work, including: building self-esteem, genograms, time lines, life books and boxes, and bibliotherapy. These tools help both professionals and clients better understand the core issues in play.

3. **Session 3: The Art and Science of Attachment**
   This session gives an introduction to the neurobiology of attachment. Early brain development in children establishes how their attachment patterns evolve, which determines how they cope with the world around them. Insecure attachment patterns have a negative impact on the child, leaving them impaired in their ability to attach to caregivers, affecting their emotional development. Learning to recognize these behaviors and exploring ways to empower parents to change this organized system of faulty internal beliefs held by the child will be the focus of this session.
Session 4: A Developmental Perspective

Session four builds on not only the child’s attachment pattern, but their developmental level of understanding of adoption. A child’s understanding of adoption is not the same as an adult’s, and careful preparation of the child and family is needed to make the transition to permanency. Sibling issues are also introduced, as siblings have very complex relationships that affect and are affected by each family they move from. The discussion will include the questions around siblings and decision-making factors in sibling placements.

Session 5: Family Constellation Challenges

This session picks up where Session 4 left off, discussing issues such as whether to place siblings together, when to separate them, and helping children discuss their feelings. This session takes a look at birth parents, those who voluntarily relinquish their children and those who have their parental rights terminated by the courts, and the need for post-adoption support. A significant area of child welfare today involves kinship care, and how professionals can help assess and support this type of family building.

Session 6: Supporting the Permanent Family

Session six explores interventions to support constellation members, and how the practice of open adoption is defined. The values, attitudes and beliefs underlying the practice are discussed and participants are asked to examine their own perspectives. Search and reunion is another focal point; reasons people search, their roller coaster emotions, and the benefits and challenges experienced by not only those who undertake this task, but all parties involved.

Session 7: Tools for Skilled Practice

This session addresses such issues as the lifelong impact of infertility for individuals and couples; individual identity, marital/couple relationships, sexuality, extended family relationships and parenting. Factors for the professional to consider during the assessment of clients considering adoption or relative caregiving are reviewed. Participants are given the opportunity to practice their assessment skill, including attention to factors to consider when looking at trans-racial adoptions. The complexities that arise when concurrent planning is the plan for a child and the issues surrounding placement disruptions and adoption dissolutions are discussed.

Session 8: Diversity, Healing and the Family

Believing that children heal best in families, the discussion in Session 8 reflects back to the neurobiology presented in Session 3, and the implications presented for healthy attachments. The difficulties that impaired attachments, developmental needs and traumatic histories bring, and the parenting challenges they created are addressed. Ways to enhance family attachment with appropriate discipline and therapeutic parenting methods will be presented. The conclusion of the curriculum focuses on the role of rituals and ceremonies in adoption and permanency related work.

“This curriculum should be required for anyone who is entering the field of adoption and permanence.”
As a result of completing ACT, participants in their pre- and post permanency work will:

- Incorporate the model of the Seven Core Issues into the assessment, education and treatment of families touch by adoption and other forms of permanency.
- Accept the profound impact of placing a child into an established family structure.
- Appreciate the additional tasks that relative caregivers must address as family roles are changed in children’s lives.
- Learn to enhance family strengths and empower the family as an agent of change.
- Embrace the interrelated core principles of attachment and neurobiology; include the impact of trauma in assessment and in the development of clinical interventions.
- Understand the additional developmental challenges that adoption and permanence place on the child.
- Be able to assist parents to learn healthy attachment-based parenting skills.
- Acquire the skills and tools for working with the whole family system to keep the child in a family setting.
- Recognize the complex issues that arise for today’s diverse family structures, including single parent families, relative adopters, domestic and internationally built families, trans-racial/trans-cultural families, and families with different types of openness and permanency arrangements.
- Respect the long term roles and needs of the birth family and the importance of their information and connections to the child.
- Competently address issues of search and reunion.
- Understand the significant influence of the child’s genetic history, race and culture.
- Value sibling relationships and their life-long importance.
- Be able to link interventions and community resources to the family.

Target Audience

ACT is recognized as a model for the industry, across a broad array of essential services. Although applications vary, ACT’s theoretical framework, concepts and techniques have been successfully applied by professionals in a range of settings, including public and private agency social workers, outpatient clinics, therapists in private practice, wraparound teams, attorneys, judges, educators, residential treatment centers, and therapeutic boarding schools. In a survey of ACT graduates, 91% of former participants responding say they are better able to prepare families to expect and handle crisis points in the adoptive and permanency life cycle.

Schedule & Cost:

The eight-day ACT curriculum is offered in various Ontario locations over a four-month period as follows:

- Fall: September to December (two consecutive days per month)
- Winter: January to April (two consecutive days per month)
- Spring: March to June (two consecutive days per month)
- Additional dates and locations can be arranged by request.

Cost for the eight-day curriculum is $1,300 per participant *Pricing is subject to change without notice.

For background information on the ACO’s initiative to bring adoption competency training to Ontario child welfare and mental health professionals please see https://www.adoption.on.ca/permanency-adoption-competency-training.

For more information on the ACO’s offerings of ACT in Ontario, contact us at 1.877.ADOPT.20 or PACT@adoptontario.ca.

© ACT: An Adoption and Permanency Curriculum for Child Welfare and Mental Health Professionals is a copyright of Kinship Center, a member of Seneca Family of Agencies in California. Through a partnership with Seneca Family of Agencies, Adoption Council of Ontario owns the exclusive Ontario license to ACT.