

# Adoption Advocate



## Child Advocacy: A Guide for Adoption Agencies

BY JENNIFER LANTER AND NANCY ROBBINS

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**A**dvocating for children to have a permanent family is the heart and soul of what we do as adoption professionals. Advocating comes with an enormous amount of responsibility for the children we serve and to the families who are seeking to adopt. Our goal is not just to achieve legal permanency through an adoptive placement, but to ensure that every child is placed in a loving family who is best equipped to meet their specific needs. This often requires adoption professionals to not only consider waiting prospective adoptive families within their agencies but also to be willing to search for a yet unknown family who may be better equipped to meet the child's needs. When discussing a child's past, possible exposure to trauma, medical and social histories, and all known information with existing waiting families or new families through our recruitment efforts, the authors propose that the adoption professional will need to consider many factors to educate and recruit prospective adoptive families effectively and ethically.

The perspectives represented in this piece come from two marketing and adoption professionals who have spent their careers studying and learning how to best advocate

for children. Some of the learning comes from mistakes made along the way. While we have always had the best of intentions, nevertheless there have been a few fails along with some truly amazing outcomes for children and their families. We share what we learned from our successes as well as our mistakes to help other adoption professionals work more effectively to help prospective adoptive families make fully informed decisions about whether or not they are the best family for a child in need of a permanent, nurturing, and loving family.

With this goal in mind, we will explore:

- Ethical considerations for adoption professionals working on behalf of children and families.
- Ethical considerations for finding families for children who have difficult and traumatic histories.
- Advocating for children in need of special care without exploiting their pain and circumstances.
- The importance of recruiting families who are educated about the scale and scope of parenting a child in need of a loving family through the adoption process.

## Ethical Considerations for Adoption Professionals

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Educated, knowledgeable, and compassionate adoption professionals provide a strong foundation for developing successful programs and processes that mutually benefit the families they serve and the children they advocate for. It is the adoption professional's role and responsibility to help ensure children and parents are both being served with accurate and the most up-to-date information about the child as part of a fully informed decision to adopt. Sometimes, this may require the adoption professional to seek out additional information from qualified medical and clinical practitioners and programs in order to better understand the specific needs of the child and how they can best communicate these needs to prospective families. When working with medical, clinical, and other professional staff/programs, we advise that you only work with licensed professionals and seek professional evaluation from programs that use only researched and evidence-based interventions.

Another critical component of ethical practice is understanding biases—not only the possible biases of the clients we serve but our own biases as well. Self-awareness is paramount to understanding the perspectives you are bringing to cases you serve. Make sure your education includes information about other cultures such as social norms, health disparities, religion, values, and ethical training.

Self-awareness can also protect you from burnout if you start struggling with burnout. Burnout can often provide unhealthy perspective and cloud your decision-making. A few times a year, we suggest that you take

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a self-inventory about how you are feeling. Learn from our own mistakes: This is hard and very important work, and those who engage in it should take time for significant self-care – or you won't last. Set boundaries, talk to a professional, and remember to take care of yourself. Simple things like drinking enough water, scheduling breaks, getting sufficient sleep, and, very importantly, not hesitating to ask for help when you need it. All of these suggestions for self-care (and others that you know benefit you) play a big role in your mental and physical health, and you should practice them regularly. We have learned firsthand that the healthier you are, the better you will serve your clients.

## Accurate and Complete Information

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It's vital that we make every effort to know and understand as much as possible about the children we serve. Often the information and files received about a child tell a very incomplete story. Read the files carefully and seek to fill in gaps with more information whenever possible. This helps ensure we are working as carefully as possible to advocate

for each child. Below are some of the most important aspects to consider when trying to find the best match of a family to a child. If important information is not known, be honest and transparent with families about lack of information and encourage them to consider possible implications of not having some information they may later wish was available. It's also important not to romanticize the story, and to check to make sure the potential parents are realistic about what the child has been through and what these past experiences mean. All known information about the child should be shared with the prospective adoptive family, and nothing withheld. This is not a comprehensive list, but the bullets below are a good start when discussing a child with a prospective adoptive family:

- Age
- Number of siblings
- Race and culture
- Personality traits
- What have they experienced?
- What are their needs, wants, and desires?
- Medical and psychological history
- What are they looking for in parents?
- What kind of family environment do they desire?
- Required sibling or other relative visits
- Have parental rights been terminated?
- Does the child want to be adopted?

## How to Advocate for Children Using Social Media Tools

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As adoption professionals, it's our responsibility to ensure that we reflect the children we are serving in a compassionate and ethical manner. Below are some tools to help create processes that will help define ethical and successful advocacy.

### **Develop an outreach and social media strategy and include the following:**

- Specific objectives for your recruitment efforts.
- Voice/tone/message for your posts and conversations about the child with the prospective adoptive family.
- Define what you consider a successful outcome.
- Follow and share posts from other organizations that align with your mission.
- Develop a style guide: a document that details specific information about what is acceptable representation of your brand and code of ethics.
- Size of file/photo quality
  - Fully clothed
  - Fully framed/no body parts cut off or out of frame
  - In keeping with rules and regulations of other organizations you are working with

### **Define and follow best practices:**

- If presenting online, secure password protected information.
- Always have and document permission.

- Be careful with the use of identifying information such as first and last name.
- Choose words carefully. Stay away from negative connotations.

#### **Don't:**

- Share before consulting your guidelines.
- Share the child's history publicly.
- Share abuse or trauma details.
- Use unflattering, stereotypical photos.
- Post content that a harmful audience might follow.

#### **Do:**

- Look for ways to advocate for clients.
- Engage your audience of adoption advocates.
- Describe personality, likes, dislikes, etc.
- Use posed or candid, flattering photos that showcase their personality.
- Accurately describe general behaviors.

When we post information about a specific child on social media, we want to share enough information for a prospective adoptive parent to want to learn more about the child. We must take steps to maintain the child's dignity and privacy, and that means some information about the child is not for public consumption and will only be shared later at the appropriate time. For example, it would be unethical and inappropriate to disclose sexual abuse to a large audience. There will be a more appropriate time to communicate this information when the interested family is learning more detailed information about the child in a private format such as meeting with the caseworker or reading the child's file. What will the child think or feel about himself

if he sees an advocacy post about him years later? What happens if we are advocating for a teen on social media and one of his peers sees the post? These are important things to consider as we work to find the best home possible for the children we serve.

Photos of children are often used in parent recruitment. We know that "a picture is worth a thousand words;" however, make sure that the words the picture is telling are true, and that you have permission to share the picture. Also, check if the child's caseworker or country of birth has regulations about sharing photos. Some countries only allow you to share photos and videos if they don't show the full face of the child. Often photo listings of children available for adoption are password protected and only accessible by approved prospective adoptive families.

When advocating for children on social media, be specific about what you want the viewer to do. Do you want them to help you advocate for the child in sharing the post? Are you looking for a forever, loving family for the child and want the prospective family to contact you? Be sure to communicate the need in your call-to-action.

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## Social Media Post Examples

Sammy has strong imitating ability. For example, she is on the dance team at school. She memorizes the actions taught by the teacher correctly. If she is shown something once, she remembers how to complete a task.

Sammy can recognize and can memorize object names; she can match and classify. She can identify transportation tools among many objects and classify them. She can identify animals by the sounds they make and imitate the animals walking characteristics.

Sammy has some independent living skills. She can wash her hands, feed herself, go to bathroom, and helps with chores independently.

Sammy's need is listed as Down syndrome. Interested in learning more about Sammy? Contact [superkids@gladney.org](mailto:superkids@gladney.org) for more details.



*Photo for example purposes only. The child pictured is not waiting for adoption.*



*Photo for example purposes only. The child pictured is not waiting for adoption.*

Meet 7 year old Kelby! He is described as sweet, courteous, cooperative, kind, and polite. We have more photos and a video of Kelby that can be shared privately. If you aren't a member of our private **Taiwan Advocacy Facebook group**, be sure to request to join to see additional photos of Kelby!

The waiting children in state care and orphanages are diverse in race, ethnicity, and culture. It's important that adoption professionals consider that same diversity in the prospective adoptive families. Setting up an information booth at community events and places of faith with a diverse population helps spread the positive message of adoption as well as the need waiting children have for qualified families to adopt them. If you have funds for internet advertising, the targeting tools offered on the platforms can assist you in reaching the demographic needed.

Once again, determine what action you want each reached group to take. For example, you might want social media influencers to share your waiting child posts to all of their followers with the goal of finding the right family for the child. Some of the groups might offer to purchase suitcases or special gifts while the child is waiting in care. Other groups might speak at a local meeting about a specific child that they feel a connection with and they want to let others know about this child's need for a loving home.

The internet is a useful method of reaching millions of people and sharing information about waiting children. Use this tool to not only bring the child to life, but also to detail what the adoption process looks like, the

*Set the prospective parents up for success through quality education and resources they can grow with as they make decisions about adopting and/or bring home their child.*

amount of education and training needed, as well as who to contact for more information. Intercountry adoption programs have very specific education requirements and so do public Foster-to-Adopt programs. Set the prospective parents up for success through quality education and resources they can grow with as they make decisions about adopting and/or bring home their child.

Once the child is placed with the family, continue providing them with local resources. Does your adoption agency or private practice provide post-adoption support? If not, make sure your client knows who they can talk to or reach out to when an issue arises and before the parents' compassion wanes. There are many non-profit agencies that offer assistance and guidance to parents, and partnering with those agencies is a great first step toward advocating for your clients.

These children depend on us to advocate for them in an ethical, well-thought-out manner so that they have a family to depend on and a place to call home.

## **Educating and Providing Long-Term Resources for Parents**

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Before the adoption process even begins it's important to start the education process for prospective adoptive parents. This means helping people understand the adoption process, what trauma means and how it impacts the human brain and development, and ways to care for their child's unique needs. It is also important to inform prospective adoptive families about attachment styles and how children may react as they begin to feel safe and secure. Regular information and education meetings are a good idea to

make available. Let interested parties know as soon as possible what to expect and make sure people are educated before getting too far into the adoption process.

For all prospective adoptive families, training is imperative, and in particular for families who are adopting children who have had adverse childhood experiences. We must make sure that the parent understands that traditional parenting will not work for many of these children. The parents may need to reframe how they were parented and might even be parenting their other children to meet the needs of the child they are adopting. As we've learned from the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, "Research suggests that just one caring, safe relationship early in life gives any child a much better shot at growing up healthy." (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean>)

Education should be ongoing during and after the adoption process. Be prepared with up-to-date resource lists and ways families can connect with educational resources and support groups. Private social media groups with other families who have experienced or are experiencing similar situations can be beneficial. Long-term support underpins successful outcomes.

Ethically and honestly advocating for children takes time, patience, knowledge, skill, and passion. It's up to us as professionals to be the voice for the child as well as to protect them.

## In Summary

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1. Ethically advocating for children is the heart and soul of adoption.
2. Education is paramount to successful placements.
3. Ethical advocacy takes skill, time, patience, awareness, and attention to finely tuned processes.

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## About the Authors



**Jennifer Lanter** is the Vice President of Communications and Education for the Gladney Center for Adoption. Jennifer provides a unique and engaging perspective about adoption, public relations, personal branding, strategic communications, crisis management, and media training. Jennifer has extensive media experience and has worked with *People* magazine, Oprah Winfrey Network, Lifetime, MTV, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and several other media outlets.

As a Fort Worth native, Jennifer Lanter received her communications degree from the University of Texas in Arlington. She began her career at the Gladney Center and has since dedicated her career to creating bright futures through the miracle of adoption. Jennifer is married to the love of her life, Tom and has two children Jessica (22) and Ben (14). She enjoys reading, yoga, exercising, and most importantly advocating for children and families.

**Nancy Robbins** is the Director of Digital Media at the Gladney Center for Adoption, where she manages all aspects of digital marketing. She has seen a vast shift in the adoption world through the power of the internet over the last 26 years. Nancy has also been blessed by adoption in her personal life through the adoption of her son 20 years ago.



Nancy received a Bachelor of Applied Arts and Science in Industrial Education from the University of North Texas. While adoption has always been a part of her family's life, she did not know how much sharing the positive message of adoption would mean to her personally until she started working at the Gladney Center. Her position allows her to provide information to clients who are seeking assistance and hope for a brighter future. Her favorite saying is "No two days are alike; yet every day something that I do helps someone who is desperately seeking information."

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