

# Ask Pact

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## Adoption-Unfriendly School Assignments

*If you are looking for more resources for teachers and schools, you can order "Pact's School Staff Guide for Adoption" from our [webstore](#) and we think the best resource available is "Adoption and the Schools" published by FAIR and also available through Pact's store. If you live in Northern CA, we offer [in service training for faculty and staff at schools](#) throughout the region.*

In a classroom, a child studies more than reading and math; she learns how the world operates beyond her own home. If he is lucky he is taught to search for commonality and to appreciate difference in his classmates and then in the people of the wider community.

One way that children are taught about the world and people around them is through assignments that focus on family. When these assignments are broadened purposefully to be inclusive and respectful of many diverse family models, children growing up in "non-standard" families can relax and learn. Too often, however, these assignments are not sensitively designed. Here are just a few of the questions we have gotten at Pact related to school assignments:

**Q:** *My daughter came home from her elementary school with a "family tree" assignment. It's a form with boxes and circles that the kids are supposed to fill in: mom and dad, brothers and sisters, grandparents. When we suggested that she could use either our family or her birth family, either was okay with us, she ripped the paper in half and screamed with tears streaming down her face, "I hate school." What are we doing wrong?*

**A:** Children who don't see their lives reflected in their assignments and by their teachers often react by getting mad or just shutting down, because they feel hurt or sad that they are not recognized, or afraid that they are not "okay" because they don't fit the "norm" being described by the assignment.

As a parent you have two tasks – to help your daughter process and understand her feelings about this assignment, and also to be her ally in thinking about how to advocate with her teacher and the school. If, as a third benefit, you can also advocate and help educate the school community, then other children will reap the benefits of your efforts.

In order to help your child process her feelings, begin by offering some of yours. "I am kind of mad about this assignment. I keep thinking about all the different kinds of families that don't fit into this kind of form. What about Jenny who lives with her mom and grandma, but doesn't know her dad? How about Jimmy, who has two moms, how is he supposed to fill it in? And what about you and other adopted kids: they have two sets of parents and they shouldn't feel like they have to choose. I like your

teacher, but I don't think this assignment is good for a lot of different kinds of families. What do you think?"

By calling out the way this kind of assignment doesn't work for other kinds of families, your daughter's feelings are being named. You are also introducing the concept that she is not alone and perhaps even has allies in her classroom, and hopefully her life, who share this experience. This assignment is often given in 2nd grade and sometimes 4th grade as well, times when children are very oriented to what is fair and are open to the notion that if something is unfair it should be fixed. This allows you and your daughter the chance to talk about what she would like to do to help make things better and/or what she would like you to do.

Most assignments can be modified to allow everyone to feel included and still reap the benefits and underlying intention of the exercise. Usually simply offering examples that give the children options and choices will ensure that children and families from all kinds of backgrounds and histories can find at least one option that validates their own situation and gives them choices about what kind of personal information they will share. Some alternatives you can consider suggesting to the teacher include:

1. Draw a picture of the people in your life who love you and you consider family.
2. Draw a picture of who lives in your home and what their relationship to you is.
3. Create your loving tree or caring tree and tell something about each person that does something important for you or teaches you something.
4. Create a kinship tree or genogram that shows people who you are related to genetically as well as those who are part of your family because you live with them or because you care about or take care of each other.

**Q:** Our 11-year-old daughter, who was born in China, joined our family when she was two years old. The first assignment of the school year turns out to be a heritage project in which the kids are supposed to tell the story of their birth and interview someone who was there. What do we do?

**A:** We have heard about this exercise several times from parents of middle school students. Some assignments just seem wrong, and this is one of them. Why should any child have to reveal their personal birth history, which in many cases includes components of their medical history, and as such is confidential? Teachers need to be asked what they are trying to accomplish with such projects—surely a better approach can be found.

Obviously many adoptees and foster children cannot complete the assignment, and that alone makes it wrong. If you don't get an immediate response from the teacher, contact the school administration. If you have an adoption affinity group, or simply know of other adoptive and foster families in your community, it can be very effective to band together to put a stop to this kind of insensitive and impossible assignment. Consider telling your child they are excused from the assignment and make this a parent battle as a way to demonstrate that you have your child's back.

**Q:** My son's teacher called today. He hasn't been turning in his assignments for 11th grade Humanities. He is an A student but is so far behind on his paper and presentation about how his family came to America, the teacher is worried he will fail the class. He has to interview two family members and then present their answers to his class. How can I get him back on track? I know these family-related topics are sensitive for him as an adopted kid.

**A:** Sometimes we assume that these challenging assignments only occur in elementary or middle school, but often high school students are asked to write deeply personal narratives as part of their writing curriculum. Coupled with a presentation, this can be a real challenge for an adoptee who is in the throes of identity formation and may not be comfortable sharing his personal information with everyone in his class.

At this age, when youth are heading towards independence, it is not uncommon for students to simply check out by not doing the assignment rather than coming to a parent for help. Be careful not to jump on the bandwagon of blame, but rather try to extract details about the assignment in order to explore options for how your son can approach the teacher (with or without your help) to adjust the assignment so that it does not ask him to reveal private information that he is not ready to share.

One family we worked with, whose student was unprepared to interview his African American adoptive parents because he knew that his birth family was Ethiopian, came up with the idea of writing a paper on international adoption in general. He interviewed several adult and teen adoptees regarding their thoughts and feelings on the subject but didn't have to reveal his own personal story.

Another student wrote a very personal narrative that included interviews with her birth family, but was allowed to make a video of her presentation that was only viewed by her teacher instead of the whole class.

Whatever the solution, be your child's ally in recognizing and acknowledging their frustration and anger in being asked to explore personal issues in front of their classmates. Help them find a work-around that allows them to pass their classes without crossing uncomfortable barriers that they are not prepared to handle.

### Alternatives for Family Tree Assignments

When parents add their expertise, their adoption savvy, their cultures, their advocacy, and their support to the school, education is enriched. When students understand the difference between respectful privacy and fearful secrecy, and when that distinction is honored by adults, children feel safe and secure enough to believe they can succeed.