



Understanding Infant Adoption 7 Handout

## Ethical Considerations for Healthcare Professionals in Pregnancy Counseling and Adoption

*Originally authored by Judith McKenzie, MSW, Executive Consultant, McKenzie Consulting, Inc. (2002); Updated by the ASCC Project Partners (2025)*

This article applies accepted values and ethics of the healthcare profession to the practice of providing pregnancy options counseling. It describes conditions under which coercion can occur and defines non-coercive counseling; explores the concept of informed consent as it applies to adoption; and offers an ethical framework in which to provide information and make effective referrals for pregnancy counseling and adoption services.

### Ethics and values underpinning the provision of health services

**Ethics defined:** Ethics is a set, theory, or system of moral principles or values. Making an ethical decision means making a choice that is consistent with a moral or professional code.

Because the health professional's own values will be challenged in this work, it is especially important to be grounded in a set of accepted professional standards of conduct or ethics that support unbiased and objective care. Some of the ethical values that relate to options counseling include:

- **The Value of Self-Determination:** This value respects a person's autonomy and capacity to shape their own life. This is based on the belief that better outcomes will result when a person's self-determination is respected, as well as the different views of self-determination among ethnic, cultural, and religious groups.
- **The Value of Fairness:** This value means that, regardless of individual and cultural differences, all patients should have access to the same unbiased information, presented with cultural humility.
- **The Value of Well-Being:** This value assumes that the goal of any clinical intervention is to improve the patient's health and well-being, and that the patient shares that goal of improvement. However, to determine what constitutes health or well-being for a patient one must consider their subjective preferences. It is the healthcare practitioner's role to understand the patient's needs and present reasonable alternatives to the patient and/or surrogate decision-makers in a way that enables them to make choices aligned with their values.

A decision-making framework that may help clarify ethical dilemmas includes:

- **Assessment:** Decide whose problem it is. Who should make this decision? Who should be included in the decision-making process?
- **Diagnosis:** Gather additional data. Have as much information about the situation as possible. Be informed about current laws and organizational policies.
- **Outcome Identification:** Share with the patient as many alternatives as possible. The more options identified, the more likely it is that an acceptable solution will be found.
- **Planning:** Help the patient assess the options identified and how each might satisfy their needs and preferences.
- **Implementation:** Help the patient carry out the decision, including collaboration with referral sources to implement the decision.
- **Evaluation:** Evaluate the results of the referral. From the patient's perspective, what is working and not working?

## What is coercion?

Coercion in the healthcare setting occurs when someone with more perceived power or authority forces a decision upon a patient; talks them into a decision; provides information that is incomplete or misleading; and/or offers gifts, bribes or other incentives for making a particular choice. Coercion could occur as a result of a parent of a minor child, or a husband or birth father, exerting excessive pressure on the patient. And it is especially detrimental when it occurs in collaboration with a professional lending credence to the forceful position.

When referring patients for pregnancy counseling and adoption, it is important to understand that coercion could possibly occur in many different ways. Coercion can simply be the result of overly directive, controlling, and/or subjective counseling from someone that the patient trusts. In adoption, coercion may consist of offering financial or other non-financial benefits to a person who is in desperate need or particularly vulnerable because of their situation. It could also occur through threat of violence or retribution. Even specific language used in discussing options, including adoption, can sometimes be perceived as coercive.

## What is non-directive, non-coercive counseling?

Non-coercive interventions include interviewing, counseling, and/or providing information and making referrals. Non-coercive methods present information and options through the use of open-ended questions designed to help the patient identify their options and preferences and make an informed decision that satisfies their needs and preferences. A non-directive, non-coercive intervention requires that the healthcare professional support the decisions made by the patient, including the decision to refuse information, even if they do not agree with these decisions.

## What is informed consent?

Informed consent is consent given after the patient or their legal representative has been provided with complete information as to the conditions or situation requiring intervention, the choices/options in services or treatment, and the consequences or probable consequences of each option with the patient freely choosing one course in lieu of another.

Informed consent in adoption is not very different from informed consent in healthcare. Although the health professional will not be involved directly in the consent process in an adoption matter, they will want to have reasonable assurances that the patient will not be exploited or "harmed" by the resource they refer the client to

for services. In adoption and in healthcare, informed consent requires knowledge, voluntariness, and competency. These elements are defined as follows:

- **Knowledge:** Requires an explanation of the condition/situation requiring intervention; a description of the nature and purpose of all alternatives; description of any expected risks or consequences of the intervention, disclosure of the possibility that the proposed intervention will be unsuccessful, explanation of consequences of intervention or, if no intervention is given, an explanation of consequences of not receiving an intervention.
- **Voluntariness:** Requires that the patient must be free to accept or reject the proposed treatment without physical or psychological coercion.
- **Competency:** Requires that the patient must be of sound mind and legally and mentally capable of making an informed decision.

## How can a healthcare professional be most effective in providing information and making referrals?

Providing pregnancy options information will be difficult because of realistic time constraints, but it can be particularly challenging in circumstances where there are significant conflicts within a family or other conflicting factors, such as differences in the helper's and patient's values, cultural/religious beliefs, and/or socioeconomic background. Nonetheless, most healthcare professionals will take the time and care to provide necessary information and referrals because they know how important their actions may be to their patient's future. Healthcare professionals can maximize their effectiveness in providing information about options and resources when they:

- Understand and demonstrate compassion for a patient's unique situation.
- Operate within the ethics and values of their profession, consistent with the policies and mission of their healthcare settings.
- Provide information and support for patients to be effective advocates for themselves and their unborn child in seeking help.
- Develop a resource bank of quality, responsive, and ethical referral sources.
- Make referrals that are responsive to a patient's needs and preferences, including location, culture, race, religion, ethnicity, and/or language.

Adoption will likely not be the chosen alternative for the majority of patients seen by healthcare professionals but, for some individuals and their children, it may be a preferred course of action.

Due to the finality of an adoption decision, it is important for healthcare professionals to offer their patients information and help in finding a resource that meets their service needs and preferences, guarantees protections from coercion and/or exploitation, and provides necessary information for a fully informed consent to adoption.

## About the Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project

It is critical that expectant parents who may wish to place a child for adoption have access to appropriately trained staff and comprehensive supports throughout the adoption process. The federally-funded Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project and the Understanding Infant Adoption curriculum are being administered by [National Council For Adoption \(NCFA\)](#), [The Adoption & Foster Care Clinic](#), [Spaulding for Children](#), and [University of Washington School of Social Work](#) for the project period 2024-2026.

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