



Adopted Children



in Education

Information for school staff and parents

Introduction

Clifton Children's Society aims to work proactively to promote a child's experience in the education system and this booklet has been developed for teachers and staff in education who come into contact with adopted children and families. It aims to raise awareness of the needs of adopted children who may experience difficulties with school life and help promote a positive relationship between adoptive parents and teaching staff.

Adopted children and their families sometimes have strong feelings about the way in which the subject of adoption is dealt with in school. They may have experienced negative comments, sometimes teasing and school projects that prove virtually impossible for many adopted children to complete.

This booklet will assist teachers and staff to help the adopted children they work with and enhance their adjustment in school. Teachers are vital to the child's feelings of worth in the classroom and we hope this booklet will help staff explain adoption to others as well as provide ideas to help other pupils, whether they are adopted or not.

This booklet also contains useful information and advice for adoptive parents.



Adoption today

Adoption means that a child or children have become members of a new family on a permanent basis and all legal rights and responsibilities for them have passed to their adoptive parents. The new parent or parents have full parental responsibility and are committed to providing a loving, nurturing and permanent home for these children.

The majority of adopted children are removed from their birth parents and brought into the care system for reasons of neglect and abuse. They will have experienced periods of foster care and once adopted often remain in indirect contact, for example through letter exchange, and increasingly direct contact with their birth family.

The children carry with them a history of loss and separation. Many will have suffered considerable trauma. They may have lost trust in adults because they have been let down so badly in the past. They will have missed out on a great deal of emotional, social, physical and academic development.

Adopted children will be as diverse as all other children in the classroom. Most adjust well to adoptive family life and make progress in school. However, the government have recognised that many adopted children need extra support in school and in July 2014 additional funding (Pupil Premium) was introduced for all adopted children to help raise their attainment levels. Pupil Premium is £1900 per eligible child per year (for more details see Pupil Premium eligibility on Gov.uk). From September 2013, due to their needs, adopted children were also given highest priority for school admission.



What adoption can mean for children

Children who have been adopted have all experienced loss of birth family, possibly including siblings, at least one foster family, friends, and if of school age a previous school. This can invoke overwhelming feelings of rejection that may resurface at various times in their lives and can add to an adopted child's feeling of 'difference'. Most children placed for adoption will have to come to terms with a painful history.

Adopted children are aware that they have birth and adoptive families and may have siblings living elsewhere. Their birth family may still be a real part of their lives through ongoing contact and this may be unsettling for all concerned in the short term, even though it may be healing in the long term.

Adopted children may have experienced a number of placements and carers before permanently joining their new family for adoption. Their education may have been disrupted as a result.

- Adopted children may have low self-esteem
- Have problems making or sustaining friends and be unable to 'read' other children's behaviour
- Choose inappropriate ways to make an impression on others and display a need to take control in a world in which they have had no control over what has happened to them
- Have difficulties with concentration
- Display aggressive behaviour that may sometimes be intense, extreme and long lasting
- Find change very unsettling e.g. change of class, school or teacher - continuity and routine is therefore important.
- Be hyper-vigilant due to insecurity which may interfere with their short term memory and learning
- Be anxious and unsettled
- Find playtimes stressful due to their unstructured and unpredictable nature and may need extra help to manage this time.

Sometimes it can be hard for professionals to understand why behavioural difficulties may still persist. Such challenging behaviours are likely to be the result of previous life experiences which have impacted on a child's brain development.

Please talk to parents to gain a better understanding of their child's background, remembering that some information may be considered confidential to the family and the child.

Issues arising from Developmental Trauma

This describes a variety of behaviours which may be an issue for many children in your school, not just adopted children, and are related to children's early experiences of being parented.

They may arise when a child has lost his/her 'primary carer' and has experienced emotional abandonment in early years. These behaviours can show themselves in many ways – children may become over anxious to please, in order to avoid another rejection. Some act out their chaotic feelings with chaotic behaviour. Others turn in on their own pain and withdraw, unable to relate to others. All these behaviours can present problems in the school setting.

A child with attachment issues may be dealing with:

- Panic
- Rage
- Desperate efforts to please
- Loss
- Identity issues
- Fear of another rejection or abandonment

Examples of behaviours that can result from attachment issues and possible causes are listed below.

Behaviours	Possible reasons why
Poor concentration	Apprehensive, feelings of panic as reminders of the past
Talking all the time	Life feels safer that way
Ignoring instructions	Too much anxiety to be able to listen
Lying, stealing, secret lives	Life may feel like a lie, not knowing the difference between fantasy and reality
Turning round	Danger may come from behind
Constantly asking the teacher apparently trivial questions	It feels too dangerous to 'get it wrong' *
Refusal to be helped with new work	'I was left helpless - I'll never be helpless again'
Disruptive behaviour	Contact with birth family may be happening soon or has just happened
Indiscriminately friendly with adults whilst rejecting their parents	They have been let down by their primary carers in the past. They want to be liked to survive in the world.

Separation – The longer a child is separated from their new family the more anxious and unsettled they may feel. Afternoons in school can be particularly stressful. This can be alleviated by allowing the child to bring a 'transitional object' from home e.g. a note from the parents in their lunchbox or a photograph in their bag.

Potential issues relating to the National Curriculum

Some lessons may cause difficulties for adopted children as they may reveal differences in their background, highlight missing information or deal with sensitive issues. Such lessons may also pose challenges for the children of single parents, same sex parents, step-parents, grandparent carers and children in the 'Looked After' system.

Such topics include:

- Family trees
- Genetics
- Personal biographies
- Baby pictures (these may not be available)
- Inherited characteristics
- Ancestors
- Medical history
- Geography lessons
- Birth data
- Family holidays
- Mother's Day and Father's Day

Children may not be able to bring in photos or articles of clothing from when they were babies as these may not have been passed on to the parents. Information required for many of the above topics may also not be available or known and some areas may cause a dilemma for adopted children such as how to represent their origins in a family tree.

Be aware that birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas or other festivals can awaken complex feelings of confusion, loss and sadness as well as happiness.

Discuss these lessons with parents prior to them taking place so that they can help prepare their children.

Widen the choices about the way in which they are completed – loving trees or family circles rather than family trees; making cards or gifts for a favourite relative rather than just mum or dad; allowing children to report on someone else in the family or a famous person rather than themselves.

Race and ethnicity – Some children will have been adopted by parents whose race and ethnicity is different to their own, especially if the parents adopted from abroad. Sensitivity will be required to help children celebrate their identity in ways that value their own ethnic origin and that of their new family. Discussion with parents will help to clarify what is appropriate to reflect the full range of the child's needs.

Other areas of the curriculum that may raise issues:-

Literature – Recognise that certain texts, although excellent and valuable, can evoke complex feelings and memories. Such examples are 'Goodnight Mr Tom' and the 'Harry Potter' books.

History - Be sensitive when discussing evacuees during world war topics as this may remind adopted children of their separation from their birth families.

Physical Education – Children who have experienced sexual abuse may be reluctant to get undressed or get changed for sport activities.

PSHE – Adopted children need to feel a sense of value about themselves and some may feel stigmatised by their background circumstances.

Discussions about drug or alcohol abuse may raise fears for adopted children about the wellbeing of members of their birth family, who have had these difficulties.

Sex Education - If an adopted child has experienced sexual abuse in the past, their knowledge and awareness may be heightened and they may make inappropriate comments. Offer de-briefings after any lesson.

Supporting Adoption- a whole school approach

Set the tone for acceptance of adoption as a valid way to build families. This is probably the most important thing you can do for adopted children because your acceptance will go a long way towards helping others to accept it. As the traditional structure of families has changed teachers play an important part in increasing the acceptance of all family structures including adoption.

Provide accurate general information about adoption. Adoption can be discussed in a matter of fact way during lessons about family life, inherited characteristics and literature that include adoption or foster care.

Support adopted children when they are asked questions about adoption.

Be prepared to advocate for adopted children if the situation requires it.

Step in and support the child just as you would if you overheard taunting or intrusive questions regarding race, divorce or other family issues. An attack on the child's family goes to the core of their being.

Treat personal revelations by children sensitively.

Recognise that some "adoption" schemes for abandoned or mistreated animals may convey difficult and even offensive messages to adopted children and their families. Consider using the term "sponsorship" rather than "adoption" on these occasions.



Partnership between school and home

Provide information to parents about the kinds of help that are available for children in the education setting and involve your SENCO or school psychology service, if necessary.

Identify a key figure in school for instance a Teaching Assistant, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator, Head teacher who will be responsible for communicating with parents.

Identify a member of staff to help with the transition from home to school and to be available whenever the child needs them. This may decrease over time.

Don't press parents for details of the child's history – this is personal information.

Treat all given information with the utmost confidentiality.

Respect parents' views regarding photographs.

Enabling a successful environment for adopted children in school

The behaviour of adopted children may be improved by using different strategies to reduce their anxieties. The following is a list of ideas that could be tried:-

- Allow the child to bring a transitional object with them into school.
- Arrange for the child to come into the classroom early to settle and to leave early or last to avoid the chaos in the playground.
- Provide a safe space in or near to the classroom for a child to go to if they need to. A special object or toy from home could be kept here.
- Use a visual timetable or for older children help them to plan their day.
- Predictability will help a child feel safe and contained.
- If changes are happening at school use a familiar member of staff as a link or support person for the child to help reduce their anxiety.
- If a child is sent somewhere new allow them to check out the space before they settle.

- Consider creating a booklet to help with transitions e.g. moving year groups which could include photographs of key people, classrooms and other school spaces.
- Think carefully about seating positions in the classroom for a child who is hyper vigilant or anxious. They may feel safer and therefore less distracted if they are sat where they can see what is going on in the classroom and without other children behind them.
- Seat the child with a friend who is a positive influence.
- Consider sitting the child close to the teacher or another adult.
- 'Check in' with the child regularly to help them feel noticed and safe.
- Provide the child with an emotions chart or picture to indicate how they are feeling. Consider using ratings.
- Allow a child to have a fiddle toy.
- If incidences occur don't expect that the child will be able to explain their behaviour. Perhaps suggest how a child may be feeling and why an incident occurred by using the phrase 'I wonder if.....?'. This will assist the child with understanding their emotions and provide them with the appropriate vocabulary.
- Remember that adopted children may not be able to say sorry – children who have experienced early trauma and neglect can experience the feeling of shame very easily.
- Deal with incidences without anger.
- Put in place any reparative opportunities as close as possible to any incidents.
- If a child is sent to a different teacher as a discipline try to send them to the same teacher if possible.
- Arrange for a key adult to supervise and structure playtimes and to help regulate emotions.
- Allow a child to have their lunch in a quiet area rather than in a chaotic dinner hall.
- Provide additional sensory breaks.

Other tips for teachers

Think carefully about what rewards and sanctions work best for the child.
Usual rewards and sanctions may not work.

Provide multi-sensory activities. Traumatized children often learn best through sight, touch and movement.

Understand there may be particular triggers in a pupil's history that may cause behavioural or emotional problems.

Be sensitive around key dates, birthdays, religious festivals etc.

Send hug tokens home for parents rather than giving hugs in school to support attachment relationships with parents.

Consider setting up small group sessions e.g. to help promote positive friendships, to discuss emotions or anger management strategies.

Be Playful, Liking, Accepting, Curious and Empathic - PLACE (as suggested by Dan Hughes, attachment therapist).

Seek further advice or training on attachment and developmental trauma.

Remember that when first placed for adoption children will always have their own Social Worker. Your school will have their details and they can be contacted with worries or concerns.

Communicating with Parents

Provide regular communication to adoptive parents, particularly in the early stages of joining a new school or class.

Consider using a home/school diary for direct communication with parents about school activities particularly for children who may have short-term memory problems.

Consider setting up a home/school diary to share positive comments about the day to help boost a child's self-esteem. Remember that negative comments may have a detrimental impact on the child if they are able to read.

Share with parents a clear and honest picture of the child's potential as far as academic achievement and social skills are concerned.

Deal sensitively and seriously with parents' concerns about their child's development.

Provide parents with a curriculum overview for the term.

Be sensitive to the needs of adoptive parents

Adoptive parents experience an exciting but rapid and demanding learning curve when their children are first placed. Like all new parents they may have some problems adjusting to parenthood no matter how much they welcome the child's arrival. Please consider what you can do to help them understand the school and education system.

Adoptive parents are not just dealing with bringing up a child but a great deal more:

Instant parenthood and perhaps the placement of more than one child at a time, possibly with different ages and different needs.

Less opportunity to establish a support network with other parents.

Often no gradual introduction to the education system via playgroup/nursery.

A range of social, emotional and behavioural reactions to deal with, including their own, the child's and those of family and friends.

If a child is experiencing difficulties in school, parents are likely to be concerned by the negative feelings expressed by other parents. They can often be isolated because of this and feel blamed.

Adoptive parents don't always have the information the school requires.

They may feel different from other parents, at least initially.

Adoption continues to be a valid and valued way to build a loving, caring family. Positive attitudes from school staff and an environment that is comfortable with

and shows respect for difference, will help to promote the health and well being of all the children in your school, including those who have been adopted.

Top tips for: Parents and Carers for supporting children who may display developmental trauma at school

Developmental trauma

The relatively new term “developmental trauma disorder” is used to cover any number of difficulties that can arise when a child’s development becomes somewhat derailed either in the womb and/or by neglect and abuse after birth. We now know from scientific research that this type of complex trauma can impact on every area of a child’s development, from their physical health to their thinking, feelings, behaviour, sense of self and ability to form attachments. Two effects that we see frequently in adopted children are foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), which is a pre-birth trauma, and attachment difficulties which occur after birth.

Ensure that you inform the school that your child is adopted as your child will have specific needs relating to separation, loss, trust, safety, stress, executive functions and family dynamics.

Visit the school with your child several times before your child starts school.

The school can give your child a safety tour of the school, showing them locked doors, exit routes and leave them with a map of the school with photographs.

Make it a priority to meet with key education staff in person at the beginning of your child’s time at the school.

View yourself as a key person in the support team around your child.

Help the school to understand your child's strengths and weaknesses.

Accept that information does need to be passed on to key personnel in school.

Be honest and open with staff when they ask you for some background information.

Trust that school will be very sensitive about confidential information.

Ensure that the school are clear about your views regarding photographs of your child.

Try to be patient with school staff who may not have had any training around developmental trauma and don't be afraid to direct them towards appropriate resources.

Giving your full support to school staff will instill real trust and confidence in them as they learn how to support your child effectively.

Have regular communication with school staff.

Request regular meetings throughout the year with the teacher and/or Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator if appropriate.

Ensure that the school receives Pupil Premium Funding for your child and ask how this will be used to support them.

If communication with school becomes difficult consider asking someone to go in on your behalf or to accompany you to meetings.

If you are struggling with any aspect of your child starting school please try to seek out some support for yourself (each school has a designated teacher for Looked After Children and this is a good place to start).

If there are difficulties with your child's behaviour ask the school to put in place any necessary reparative opportunities as close as possible to any incidents and do not extend this at home. Just let your child know that you know and that you are part of the team supporting him /her.

Share what works at home as the school will be very grateful for these clues.

Ask school what successes they have had and try these out at home so that there is consistency and repetition.

Let school know if your child is particularly concerned about something even if it is something outside school.

Make a huge effort to convince your child that you are able to keep them in mind even though they are separated from you when in school.

Try not to feel threatened when a member of staff forms a close relationship with your child.

General Support (can be applicable to all children)

- ✚ Take an active part in stimulating your child's interest in class topics.
- ✚ Always attend parents' evenings / sports days / concerts etc even if you have only just met with key staff.
- ✚ If your child is at school staff will assume he /she is well enough to be there so don't send them if you think they are overtired or ill.
- ✚ Think carefully about sharing opportunities to work with your child at school as it may have a really positive impact on your child's experience.
- ✚ Keep an eye on any sensory overload by monitoring how many activities are planned for evenings and weekends.
- ✚ Read with your child regularly.

Adoption support at the Centre



The Centre is a voluntary, independent and registered adoption support agency for people in the South West and surrounding areas. As an adoption support agency we offer a wide range of groups, activities, training and therapy for adoptive families.

If you would like further information advice please contact us on: 0117 9558826
or

Email: info@adoptionssupportcentre.org

Web: www.adoptionssupportcentre.org

Facebook: CASEbristol

The Centre for Adoption Support and Education
162 Pennywell Road
Easton
Bristol
BS5 OTX

Some useful reading

Caroline Archer (1999)
Parenting the Child Who Hurts

Louise Bomber (2007)
Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies to supporting children with attachment difficulties in school.

Louise Bomber (2011)
What about me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day.

Louise Bomber and Dan Hughes (2013)
Settling troubled pupils to learn: Why relationships matter in school.

Kate Cairns (2004)
Learn the Child. Helping looked after children to learn. A good practice guide for social workers, carers and teachers.

Vera Fahlberg (1994)
A Child's Journey through Placement

Dr Heather Geddes (2005)
Attachment in the classroom: The link between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school.

Dr Heather Geddes (2006)
Attachment in the classroom. The links between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school.

K Golding et al (2013)
Observing children with attachment difficulties in preschool settings. A tool for identifying and supporting emotional and social difficulties.

K Golding et al (2013)
Observing children with attachment difficulties in school. A tool for identifying and supporting emotional and social difficulties in children aged 5-11 years.

D Howe (2011)
Attachment across the life course. A brief introduction.

Dan Hughes (1999)
Building the Bonds of Attachment

Perry et al (2009)
Teenagers and attachment. Helping adolescents engage with life and learning.

D Siegel and T Bryson (2011)
The Whole Brain Child. 12 proven strategies to nurture your child's developing mind.

Some useful resources

Post Adoption Centre
5 Torriano Mews
London NW5 2RZ
Advice Line: 020 7284 5879
www.postadoptioncentre.org.uk

Adoption UK
46 The Green
South Bar Street
Banbury
Oxfordshire
0844 848 7900
www.adoptionuk.org.uk

Coram BAAF
Coram Campus
41 Brunswick Square
London WC1N 1AZ
020 7520 0300
www.corambaaf.org.uk

The booklet below aims to provide insight into why these challenges might occur and guidance on how to manage key areas of difficulty to help adopted children thrive in primary school.

