

# The Adopted Child in School



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to Change

**Lives...**

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## **Introduction**

There are a number of reasons why children are unable to live with their biological parents and become adopted. Sadly, in a number of cases, it is because they have experienced abuse and trauma early in their lives; either from their parent(s) or from someone who had a duty to care for them.

Children's responses to these experiences can have profound effects on their understanding of themselves and everyone they encounter; which includes their adoptive parents and their teachers. Children can make the adjustment to an adoptive family and develop the capacity to have trusting and positive relationships with others. However, we know that it can be a challenge to help a child to realise we are not going to fulfill their worst expectations of adults. Understanding the principles of attachment can be a helpful guide to dispelling the negative expectations a child may have about themselves or you.

## **What is attachment?**

Attachment is an often-used word which describes the quality and not just the relationship between a parent and child.

Research has shown that we are all born with the capacity to form an attachment for our survival. In order to survive, the human infant requires the care of someone else to provide them with nourishment and protection. The way we are parented early in life when we are needy and dependent, has a strong bearing on the way we view ourselves and others. The way we view ourself and other people is called an internal working model.

## **Internal working models**

Internal working models guide us in all our relationships. They are deeply held, pre-verbal structures which we may or may not be aware of but which have a significant impact on us; particularly when we have a need that should be met (e.g. distress, hunger, fear). There are four patterns of internal working models described in the research which can help us understand how a child may have learnt to view adults and themselves.

## **Types of attachment and the behaviours that typify them:**

### *Secure attachment*

Children who have care which is sensitive to their needs have a positive view of themselves and others. This pattern is called secure attachment. Secure attachment promotes social and emotional development; for example, securely attached children are able to value themselves and see others as kind. They will approach people for help when needed but have a degree of independence appropriate to their age.

### *Avoidant attachment*

Children who have experienced care which has been rejecting of their needs are mistrustful of others. These children have had to learn to keep their needs to themselves and so have had to become self-reliant; they may feel they are capable and do not need others. This is called avoidant insecurity. These children are unlikely to ask for help and may be resistant when it is offered. They may have inappropriately high levels of independence.

### *Ambivalent attachment*

Children whose parents have been extremely inconsistent in their care tend to have a negative view of themselves and see others in very positive terms. This pattern is called ambivalent attachment. These children have learnt that their needs were only met when they exaggerated their distress. These children are likely to find independence difficult; they tend to rely on others and refuse to accept that they can be independent. They can be reluctant to try new activities. Their behaviour has been described as "attention seeking".

### *Disorganised attachment*

Children who have experienced parents who are frightening and dangerous when they have a need learn that their needs are never properly dealt with. They view themselves as bad and unworthy. In their eyes, other people are potentially abusive. They are often mistrustful of others; especially anyone who has any kind of authority over them. This pattern is called disorganised insecurity because no matter what they do, their needs are never met and so they had no organised way of dealing with their distress. As a result of having no organised or predictable way of dealing with their difficulties, they often perplex the adults in their lives who see them as unpredictable. However there are some characteristic ways in which they may have learned to cope:

Children who have experienced chaotic care and physical abuse do not trust anyone to have control over them because they expect them to abuse it. To manage this fear they are reluctant to let others have any control whatsoever and so can be controlling and oppositional themselves.

Some children have learned to compulsively obey all demands for fear of reprisals and so lack the capacity to assert their wishes and needs.

Both sets of experiences leave children particularly vulnerable to the recollection of past trauma (e.g. flashbacks) and on the look out for danger. As the trauma they have experienced has happened in their relationships, these experiences can sometimes be triggered by people acting in ways which might seem innocuous to them but may be potentially frightening to the child (e.g. raising their voice to gain their attention).

## **Possible reasons for such behaviours**

While difficult behaviours may be obvious, the reasons for the behaviours may not be. The child may well not understand why. We may not understand why. Here are some ideas:

### *Triggers*

What might seem to be unpredictable behaviours may result from everyday incidents e.g. loud noises, a touch, which trigger sub-conscious memories of past experiences, which may feel overwhelming to the child.

### *Control*

The behaviours which are difficult to manage, may be an effort to control the environment and the people within it. This may stem from a lack of trust in other people being in control. It could also be a reaction to a previous lack of control within their environment and a subsequent need for boundaries and security.

### *Preoccupations*

The child's mind may be preoccupied with issues other than learning. Just coping with being in a family and learning to trust may dominate the child's world. It may be a long time before these children can focus on schoolwork and particularly on doing homework.

### *Incapacity to cope with change*

All children who are adopted have experienced losses. So for them change has deep rooted meanings. This may be related to feelings of loss, of being out of control, and extreme insecurity.

### *Very low self-esteem*

Many adopted children can have low self-esteem which means they are sensitive to failure which confirms their view of themselves. They also find it difficult to manage praise.

### *Uncertainties about reality and fantasy*

Adopted children can have difficulties telling the truth. What has happened to them means universal truths of parentage and love, so basic for all children, have been betrayed.



## **What teachers can do to help?**

We realise that you will already do many of these!

### **Be accepting of adoption**

Families have changed over the years. Teachers can do a great deal if they can set a tone of acceptance for a range of family structures and especially adoption. They can demonstrate this by including adoption when they talk about families, inherited characteristics, and care for children. The school could recognise the importance of 'Adoption Day'. The child and family may have their own special days, such as the day the adoption went through.

Use the term 'birth' parents rather than 'natural' or 'real' parents – which can seem to imply that adoptive parents are by comparison, unnatural or unreal.

### **Reinforce the sense of belonging and acceptance**

Children who are adopted have had experiences of breaks in building secure relationships. Teachers can help the child by promoting their feelings of being accepted and belonging. One way would be to greet the child by name in the morning and try hard to end each day on a positive note.

### **Build self-esteem**

Give positive, low key, genuine praise. Don't be put off by a negative reaction to it or it being rejected – you can be sure it is needed to build up different understanding of themselves.

### **Check the curriculum**

Some work will identify the child as different, e.g. work on family histories, family trees, Mother's/Father's days, baby photos, biographies, family holidays. It will help to discuss the curriculum with the parents beforehand, so that they can prepare the child in a way that is comfortable for them. Listening to the parents helps the teacher to be sensitive to the particular issues for an adopted child.

### **Organisation**

Don't 'nag' the child about organisation; you could help by providing strategies to enable the child to be more organised and more able to take increased responsibility. The child will be helped by clear, consistent, classroom routines, simple displays of prompts, and having more time allowed, for the child to learn to be organised.

## **Be creative in your discipline**

Set small achievable targets. When the child shows signs of difficulties, step in and give the child strategies and a 'safe space' to regain self-control before it is lost. Discipline is about taking control which can be a frightening experience.

## **Anticipate/be aware of signs of bullying**

Teachers may overhear intrusive questions being asked by peers. Talk to the family about whether there is a story the family and child uses to deal with unwelcome questions. The teacher can step in to help the child being questioned, in much the same way as for issues such as divorce, race, etc. Adopted children's feelings about their families are at the core of their being. They will need help to protect that core.

## **Use space sensitively**

Avoid placing in confined spaces against their will e.g. an office with the door closed, but offer secure spaces to sit if the child feels anxious. Some children may even need to 'build' round themselves with cushions etc.

## **Homework**

Managing children to do homework is a skill all parents have to learn. Be understanding and talk to the parents about homework. Homework can be a real issue, which increases the pressures at home. Homework needs to be clearly set, achievable for the child and aid learning.

## **Talk to the families – keep lines of communication open**

The family may have adopted the child and been brought suddenly into contact with schools. They will need information about school systems so they can support their child. Adoptive parents feel different to other parents: they are dealing with much more than just bringing up a child. They are dealing with instant parenthood, perhaps the placement of more than one child – children with competing needs, and perhaps a less established support network for them as parents. Teachers need to know from the family whether there are confidentiality issues which could be breached by using the child's birth family name on class lists, displays or photographs of the children published outside the classroom.

## **Ask for support when you need it**

Tell the family if you need more information or guidance. Agree with them how you can get this. When children are first placed they will have a Social Worker. You could talk to the Social Worker or consult with the Adoption Support Social Worker.

“Formate alternative te ketij publikimi ofrohen me kerkese. Kjo perfshin dhe gjuhe te tjera, me shkronja te medhaja, shkronja per te verberit, kasete degjimi, disk kompjuteri ose email.”

Albanian

আপনি যদি অনুরোধ করেন তাহলে এই পুস্তিকাটি বিকল্প ছাঁদে, যেমন, অন্য কোনও ভাষায়, বড় হরফে, ব্রেইলে, অডিও-ক্যাসেটে, কমপিউটারের ডিস্কে বা ইমেলের মাধ্যমে পেতে পারেন।

Bengali

“本刊物備有其他的格式可供索取。這些包括有其他語言版，大字版，盲人用版，錄音帶版，電腦磁碟版或電子郵件版。”

Chinese

प्रार्थना करने पर यह प्रकाशन दूसरे रूपों में प्राप्त किया जा सकता है। जिस में सम्मिलित है, दूसरी भाषाओं में, बड़े छापे में, ब्रेअल, सुनने की टेप पर, कम्प्यूटर की डिस्क पर या ई-मेल द्वारा।

Hindi

“ਇਹ ਪੁਸਤਕ ਬੇਨਤੀ ਕਰਨ ਤੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਵੀ ਉਪਲਬਧ ਹੈ। ਜਿਵੇਂ ਕਿ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾਵਾਂ ਵਿਚ, ਵੱਡੇ ਛਾਪੇ ਤੇ, ਬ੍ਰੇਲ ਵਿਚ, ਸੁਣਨ ਵਾਲੀ ਟੇਪ ਤੇ, ਕੰਪਿਊਟਰ ਡਿਸਕ ਜਾਂ ਈ ਮੇਲ ਤੇ।”

Punjabi

“اس اشاعت کو متبادل اشکال میں درخواست کرنے پر حاصل کیا جاسکتا ہے۔ اس میں دوسری زبانیں، بڑا پرنٹ، بریل (جیسے اندھے چھو کر پڑھ سکیں)، آڈیو کیسٹ، کمپیوٹر ڈسک یا ای میل شامل ہیں۔”

Urdu

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