

Welcoming an adopted child to your secondary school

Starting a new school can be a daunting time for any child. For children who have been adopted there can be many additional layers of complexity. This short guide gives an overview of some issues facing adopted children and their families, and practical strategies to help schools and families work together to enable an adopted child to settle into their new school and to thrive there.

What is Adoption?

Adoption is a legal and permanent way of providing a new family for a child who cannot live with their birth family. Once an adoption order is granted, all legal responsibilities and rights are transferred to a child's adoptive parents.

In modern adoption, very few adopted children have been relinquished voluntarily by their birth parents. Sadly, in the majority of cases, a judge has decided that the severity of abuse and/or neglect that they have experienced justifies permanent removal from their birth parents, and nobody else in their family is able to care for them.

Once they enter the care system, a child will usually live with a temporary foster family. Some children will experience several changes of family during this time, and will continue to have regular contact with their birth families. Many will be separated from their siblings.

By the time a child is adopted, they will have experienced many losses and transitions. They then face the task of building loving attachments with a new family. Children who were adopted at an older age may have conscious memories of traumatic early experiences, their birth family and their foster families, but children adopted while young will still bear the impact of their early life experiences even if they don't remember them.

Action Points

Ensure a comprehensive transition plan is in place, including parents, key staff from both schools, SENDCOs, social workers (if appropriate) and other relevant professionals.

The Impact of Early Experiences

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that a child's earliest experiences have an immense and long-lasting impact on their development which is not fixed simply by being placed in a loving adoptive family.

There is not the scope within this short guide to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by some adopted children. However there are some common issues that may be relevant in school:

Attachment: in ideal circumstances, a child will express their needs and have those needs consistently met by their primary caregiver. This, repeated many times per day, along with the caregiver's other nurturing behaviours (rocking, smiling etc.) will help to build a strong attachment, creating a secure foundation for the child. When a child's care has been persistently neglectful or unpredictable, it is difficult to establish this secure attachment and the child learns early that adults can't be trusted and the world is not safe. Without this secure foundation, it is difficult for a child to explore their world, make new relationships and learn. A range of responses may develop in response to inconsistent and neglectful care, including passivity, anxiety, fear or excessive compliance.

Difficulties with self-regulation: a young baby learns how to manage their emotional state through their relationship with their primary caregiver. When a child is often hungry, tired, frightened or hurt without being comforted, this skill is not learnt. A child exposed to a chaotic environment develops a strong flight-fight-freeze response which is not easy for them to overcome, and this may be set off by triggers which are not obvious to the child or the adults around them.

Sensory integration difficulties: the brain function of assimilating and making sense of sensory information may not work as well for children who have experienced neglect or been exposed to drugs or alcohol in the womb. This can make it harder for some children to sit still, manage noises and crowds, or deal with other sensory input, such as scratchy clothing.

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: this is an umbrella term for a range of diagnoses caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb. Alcohol crosses the placenta in the bloodstream of a developing foetus, and can affect physical and brain development in a number of ways. Up to 70% of adopted children have been exposed to alcohol in the womb.

Action Points

Some children who managed well in the primary school environment find secondary school overwhelming, with frequent changes of rooms, unstructured time, and crowded corridors. Plan for extra support for organisational skills, provision of a safe base, nurture group, buddying, 1-1 support. Ensure that all staff (including ancillary staff) receive relevant training in the impact of trauma and disrupted attachment, and are aware of any specific needs.

Some Strategies

No two adopted children are exactly the same, but there are some common strategies which adoptive parents have told us have improved their children's experiences of school and progress in learning:

Key person: many adopted children benefit from having a key person in school who they can go to for support. Ideally this person would stay the same as the child moves through school years. The key person can act as an attachment figure at school, helping to ensure the child feels secure and safe.

Think toddler: the social and emotional age of a child who has experienced developmental trauma is often much lower than their chronological age. They may respond better to activities and approaches appropriate for a younger child.

Mitigating the school environment: many adopted children find transitions (between activities, rooms and classes), special days (such as Mothers' Day) and school trips difficult to manage and may need extra support. At secondary school, some challenging topics can be triggering for children who have experienced losses,

neglect, domestic violence and physical or sexual abuse.

Communication: adoptive parents are better able to support their children to manage at school if they are fully informed of situations such as staff absence, changes to timetable etc. Regular home-school communications in an agreed format ensure that parents and staff are working together to support children, e.g. via text, regular phone calls, emails or home-school logbooks.

Action Points

While it is not possible to shield children from all challenging content, parents can support and prepare their children better if they are aware. Ensure that parents know which topics, books, etc. will be covered each year. Common areas such as autobiography, genetics, PSHE work on crime, drugs, relationships, etc. can all pose particular challenges for adopted children.

What support is available?

Adoption UK: we offer a range of resources for adoptive parents and schools on our website: www.adoptionuk.org.uk

Post-adoption social workers: if families are involved with post-adoption support, the social workers can be a useful source of advice and information.

Pupil Premium Plus: according to Ofsted, this must be spent on "...helping adopted children emotionally, socially and educationally by providing specific support to raise their attainment and address their wider needs." It is good practice to discuss the use of PP+ with parents, but possible uses include training/resources for staff, funding 1-to-1 support, providing calm rooms and nurture support, providing therapeutic services, Adoption UK membership.

Virtual schools: the Children and Social Work Act 2018, expanded the role of virtual schools to include adopted children. They can offer advice, guidance and support.

Adoption UK can provide support, advice, training and guidance to schools through our specialist education membership.

Members receive access to Adoption UK's online INSET materials and other downloadable resources, regular news updates, exclusive webinars, discounts on education books, and Adoption UK publications including our bi-monthly magazine.

Find out more on our website: www.adoptionuk.org.uk