

Working with looked after or adopted children in school



A guide for teachers, parents and carers of
looked after or adopted children

Corporate Parenting
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Bengali: বাংলা, ভাষায় তথ্যাবলীর জন্য অথবা আপনার একজন দোভাষী অর্থাৎ ইন্টারপ্রিটরের দরকার হলে, অনুগ্রহ করে উপরে যে সব টেলিফোন নম্বর দেওয়া হয়েছে সেগুলোতে ফোন করে যোগাযোগ করুন।

Chinese: 如果需要漢語版本，或需要口譯人員，請用上述號碼聯繫。

Italian: Per informazioni in italiano, o se desidera l'aiuto di un'interprete, contatti i numeri elencati in precedenza.

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Punjabi: ਪੰਜਾਬੀ, ਦੇ ਵਿਚ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਦੇ ਲਈ ਜਾਂ ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇੰਟਰਪ੍ਰੀਟਰ ਦੀ ਜ਼ਰੂਰਤ ਹੈ, ਤਾਂ ਕ੍ਰਿਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਉੱਪਰ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਨੰਬਰਾਂ 'ਤੇ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

Turkish: Sağlanan hizmetlerle ilgili bilgileri Türkçe, istiyorsanız ya da bu dillerden çevirmene gereksinim duyarsanız, lütfen yukarıdaki telefon numaralarını arayınız.

Urdu: اردو میں معلومات کے لئے، یا اگر آپ کو ایک انٹرپریٹر کی ضرورت ہے، تو براہ مہربانی اوپر دیئے ہوئے نمبروں پر رابطہ کریں۔



Introduction

Early childhood experiences can impact on the ability of any child to learn and form relationships with peers and adults.

A child who is fostered or has been adopted may present particular challenges as a consequence of their own traumatic early experiences, and this guide is intended to help teachers understand and respond to some of these challenges. Hopefully, it will also help teachers to make sense of the behaviour of other children too.

Whilst it is true that not all fostered and adopted children will experience difficulties in school, it is a fact that many do. An adoptive mother, engaged in a web-based dialogue on the subject, expressed the problem well:

'I once overheard a teacher describe my son as "the child from hell". Yup, that's him.... that's where he came from. He doesn't live there any more, but he's still a bit singed.'

All children who have been fostered or adopted have experienced loss – loss of their birth family, possibly loss of one or many foster families, friends, previous schools etc. Many children will be unable to trust adults as they have been let down in the past by those who should have been able to look after them. In partnership with parents and carers, teachers have a vital role to play in helping children 'catch up' emotionally, socially and educationally.





Attachment theory

Critical to understanding the behaviours that children may exhibit is a knowledge about 'attachment', which has been described as *"an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures through space and time and serves to join them emotionally"* (Klaus & Kennell, 1976).

The attachment between a baby and its mother begins in pregnancy, develops through infancy and toddlerhood and lays the foundation for future relationships. Children with a secure attachment will respond positively to other children, have good social skills, high levels of self-esteem, cope with setbacks and have independence skills.

Where a parent has been unable to develop this bond, the child may suffer from attachment difficulties. Some studies have indicated that as many as 40% of children in schools may have some degree of attachment difficulty. Children may exhibit these difficulties in a number of ways – they may be over anxious to please, desperate to do anything to escape rejection. Some may act out their chaotic feelings in chaotic behaviour. Others may withdraw, unable to relate to either peers or adults.

When the child has experienced neglect, trauma, abuse or pain, these difficulties may be severe. Symptoms may include defiance, aggression, controlling behaviour, attention seeking, persistent lying or stealing, lack of empathy or conscience, inability to make or keep friends, short concentration span, inability to accept help and much more.



People used to think that babies who were adopted 'would not notice the change' and that all adopted children were 'the lucky ones' who would be settled and loved in their new families and not exhibit any of these behaviours. But ALL adopted children – babies, toddlers and

older – will have experienced grief, loss and trauma. Many will have been neglected and abused along the way, so it may not all be plain sailing.

In the centre of this guide is a pull-out table which describes some of the behaviours you might encounter in the classroom. It explains why they occur and suggests some strategies for managing them. Please be aware, however, that not everything works for every child. Make sure that strategies are discussed with the child's parents/carers, who will know what works and, just as importantly, doesn't work for them.



Curriculum issues

There are some areas of the curriculum which have the potential to cause anxiety or distress to children who are looked after or who have been adopted. It is helpful if teachers give particular thought to the following (the list is not exhaustive):

Family trees or histories; personal biography or timelines – children may not have information, or may not wish to talk/write about it. Some children may actually have been encouraged not to give all the details of their birth parents and early history. How to represent their origins may cause a dilemma. Asking a child to write about 'my earliest memory' or something similar may trigger unwelcome behaviour.

Growth and development - asking children to bring in baby photos etc could easily trigger distress or confusion. Many children will not have such photographs. Discussion about inherited characteristics may be uncomfortable, especially for a trans-racially adopted child who is so clearly unlike the parents.





Sex education – if a child has suffered sexual abuse in his/her earlier life he/she may have an unusually early awareness and may make inappropriate comments.

PE/Games/Dance – a child who has been abused may be uncomfortable when required to remove clothing. Playing with other children may be difficult because of a lack of social understanding.

Literature – some texts may be distressing, particularly on themes of loss, loneliness or death. Any about abandoned children or those where a child misbehaving is threatened with being taken into care e.g. 'Goodnight Mr Tom', 'The Suitcase Kid', are best avoided.

Child development – discussions about parenting and one's own childhood experiences are part of the syllabus and need sensitive handling.

PSHE issues – e.g. topics such as drug or alcohol abuse may serve as painful reminders of circumstances which may have brought the child into the care system in the first place. Adults in the child's birth family may be involved in such activity - a cause of anxiety for the child.

RE - Celebrations – significant times of the year may be particularly difficult for these children: a child in a children's home may be the only child there who has no family to go to at Christmas; a birthday may remind an adopted child of their circumstances; being required to make a card for Mother's day or Father's day can bring its own trauma.



Do schools still ask children to write about their holidays?

Some foster carers look upon the annual family holiday as their time for a break from fostering and the looked after child may be placed temporarily with a respite carer while the main carer goes away – this may not be something the child would necessarily want to share.



Good practice - tips for teachers

- First and foremost the child needs to get the message “we want you here”. Your body language will tell the child a lot. Greet the child by name each day. Try to end each day on a positive note.
- Avoid threats of removal or exclusion, as these will simply reinforce the child’s perceptions of being unworthy and unlovable. It is better to bring the child closer to the teacher at times of stress rather than remove them – ‘time in’ not ‘time out’. If he/she needs to be removed from a room, try to do so positively e.g. “let’s go and see Mrs X”.
- Listen to the child or young person. Validate their feelings e.g. “You are finding this hard aren’t you?” Listen to their behaviour as well as their words. Observe patterns of behaviour and record them. Learn the triggers.
- Use positive behavioural management approaches.
- Set small achievable goals.
- Reassure the child or young person that you are there for them, whatever it is that they are worrying about.
- Liaise fully with the parents or carers. They will know the triggers and have their own strategies to share with you.
- Use praise often but keep it low key.



Make school a place for Playfulness Acceptance Curiosity Empathy

(Dan Hughes, 2002)

WHAT BEHAVIOURS CAN RESULT FROM ATTACHMENT DIFFICULTIES

Attachment type	Behaviour	What this means for child
AVOIDANT (I'm OK, you're not OK)	Withdrawn Unable to make or keep friends Bullies other vulnerable children	I have to rely on myself and nobody else. I respond to frightening situations by fleeing. I don't expect other people to like me. I pretend to be strong by making other children do what I want.
	Refusal of help with work	I was left helpless before. I'm not going to be left helpless again.
AMBIVALENT (I'm not OK, you're OK)	Loses or destroys property	I have no sense of the value of anything. I have little interest in things if they are not mine. I am angry and I take it out on things.
	Talks all the time, asking trivial questions	I feel safer if I do all the talking. I want to communicate but don't know how.
	Demanding teacher attention all the time	I fear that if I don't let you know I'm here you may leave me on my own. Even negative attention is good. I fear getting it wrong.
	Hostile when frustrated Poor concentration, fidgeting, turning round	I will feel shame and humiliation if my difficulties are discovered. I must scan the room all the time for danger. I must stay hyper-aroused. I dare not relax.
DISORGANISED (I'm not OK, you're not OK)	Refuses to engage with work	Getting things wrong is frightening. Being wrong will lead to rejection AGAIN.
	Tries to create chaos and mayhem	It feels chaotic inside so it feels safer if it is chaos outside as well.
	Oppositional and defiant	I need to stay in control so things won't hurt me. I do not want to be exposed as stupid. You are horrible like all adults.
	Sexually aggressive	I know from past experience that sex = power and I want to be in control.
INDICATORS OF ATTACHMENT DIFFICULTIES GENERALLY	Unable to accept praise or to have fun	I am not worthy of praise and you are stupid if you don't realise how bad I am. I am unlovable.
	Physically or verbally abusive	I respond to frightening or threatening situations by fighting, fleeing or freezing.
	Ignores instructions	I have too much anxiety to be able to listen. I can only retain one instruction at a time as too much going round in my head. I am easily distracted.
	Sulkiness, avoids eye contact	I don't dare see what others think. I have no words to describe my feelings - looking sulky is a cover-up.
	In trouble at break times	I fear rejection by my peers. I panic in crowds. I cannot self-regulate when stressed.
	Lying or living in fantasy	I prefer to make things up how I would like them to be. I'm not sure who I am or what the truth is. I don't know the difference between fantasy and reality.
	Stealing	I have no expectation of getting something so I'll just take it. I have no idea you may feel hurt or anger and when I see the effect I have I feel powerful.
	Behaviour suddenly deteriorates	There is a painful anniversary coming up. A new sibling has arrived. I have got contact with birth family coming up/ have just come from contact with birth family.

If you have a child who exhibits a number of the behaviours outlined on this chart, you

Why not pull out these centre pages or copy them and pin them up in the staffroom?

EMOTIONAL ISSUES AND WHAT MIGHT YOU DO?

	Possible triggers	What might you do?
g		Introduce a buddy system. Consider 'circle of friends' approach. Encourage the child to help around the school.
	Singled out for 1:1 support	Encourage work in pairs or small groups. Ask the child to help another who is less able.
.		Validate the child's feelings, "I can see that you are angry...". Help the child repair/restore where possible - together.
't		Have set routine. Make sure all first tasks are simple and achievable. Seat child close to you. Allow child to wait quietly.
y		Notice the child explicitly. Give child something to look after for a while. Give child responsibilities for things (not people).
	Task that is hard/new/unusual	Small step differentiation. Use timer to divide tasks.
	Sights, smells and sounds can trigger panic as reminders of past trauma	Arrange seating so there is no one behind the child but where you can stay in contact. Laugh with the child, even at silly things.
ction	Task that is hard/new/unusual	Offer choices. Make sure both are acceptable! Make lessons/tasks very structured (multiple choice/cloze/sentence completion. All materials to hand.
ll.		Focus on modifying most serious behaviour. Validate the child's feelings. " I can see that you are angry/upset....."
be	Task that is hard/new/unusual	Be assertive but keep emotional temperature down. Avoid showing anger, irritation or fear. Start each day with clean slate.
	Variety of stimuli including stress	Record all incidences very clearly. Seek advice from other agencies (see back page).
ow		Do praise but don't be too effusive and be specific about what you are praising. Privately may be more acceptable to child.
eing		Avoid threat of removal or rejection. 'Time in' not 'time out'. If unavoidable, do so positively "I need to get on with the class - you come and sit here till you feel better. Speculate aloud why it might have happened (don't ask child to explain).
sily		Keep format same each day. Describe plan of activities for session at outset. Do the child's remembering for him/her! Let the child make lists on Post-Its.
y	Face-to-face contact. Being told "look at me when I'm talking to you"	Find ways to reassure - smile, thumbs up. Encourage playing games to make children laugh. Sit side by side.
	Unstructured time	Reduce time in playground, introduce tighter structure and supervision, create inside 'retreat', establish nurture group.
ure en		Avoid accusing child of lying or fantasising. State the truth of the matter briefly and simply.
ave ve I	Rejection by peers	Do not insist on 'sorry'. Suggest an action that might repair damaged relationships. Try not to leave desirable things lying around!
d. I n	Special occasions like Christmas, birthdays or Mother's Day Before and after weekends	Be sensitive in curriculum delivery. Allow child time and space to manage feelings away from the classroom.

should consider inviting the appropriate agency (see back) to a multi-agency meeting.



- Consider where the child is placed in the classroom. It may be helpful to have the child near the front but close to a wall to minimise distraction and the need for the child to scan all round for possible danger. But don't confine them against their will.
- Plan for change. Changes to school routine need to be supported. Beginnings and endings may be highly charged times – both big (end of school year, new teacher) and small (moving from one classroom to another, beginning of school week, end of lesson). Give low-key reminders about what is happening next, always trying to help the child stay focused and relaxed.



- Unstructured time can be difficult – try shorter break/lunch times.
- Take care of yourself. You too may need support from others.

Homework can be a particular source of stress. Homework needs to be clearly set and achievable. Many looked after or adopted children have huge difficulties with organisation and may appear lazy or uncooperative. Homework can also lead to control struggles if a child refuses to comply and this can lead to parenting battles which compound the difficulties these children bring to families. Question whether it is worth the battle.



Adoptive parents

Having children can be exhausting. For adopters, instant parenthood can be overwhelming and leave them feeling very vulnerable. They will have much to contend with:



- A range of emotional, social and behavioural issues
- Less chance of a supportive network of other parents
- No gradual nurturing into the education system via playgroup and nursery
- A feeling of being different from other parents
- A possible incomplete picture about the child's past – they may not have the detail you require

Please remember they need your help and support. Try to keep criticism low key and give positive feedback.



Contacts

For more information about looked after children contact:
Education Support Service for Children in Care on 01992 555926.

For more information about adopted children contact:
The Adoption Support Team on 01707 897652

Further reading

- A Child's Journey Through Placement
by Vera Fahlberg: BAAF 1994
- Attachment in the Classroom
by Heather Geddes: Worth Publishing 2006
- Building the Bonds of Attachment
by Dan Hughes: Jason Aronson 1999
- Parenting the Child who Hurts (X2)
by Caroline Archer: Jessica Kingsley 1999

Thanks to Kate Luke and a group of adoptive parents whose contributions to the production of this leaflet were invaluable.



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