



# Supporting adopted children in school

a guide for parents and schools



Essex County Council

## Introduction

As a parent or teacher of an adopted child who is struggling with school, you may find yourself wondering how to deal with this and provide the best support. This booklet, produced by the Essex County Council Post Adoption Team offers practical strategies to help parents and teachers work together most effectively and offers a greater understanding of how a child's past experiences can affect their ability to cope within school.

## Understanding the impact of life experiences

Early childhood experience can impact on the ability of any child to learn and form relationships with peers and adults. A secure home environment, responsive carers and stable experience of school are crucial factors in children's health, and physical and emotional development.

Adopted children may present particular challenges as a consequence of early trauma. Many experience multiple losses, for instance, loss of their birth family, of one or many foster families, friends, and previous schools etc. A popular perception is that babies who are adopted are the 'lucky ones' who do not notice 'change' and that all adopted children settle in their new families and do not exhibit any difficult behaviours. However all adopted children, whether they are babies, toddlers or older, are affected in different ways by grief, loss and trauma.

As a result, the difficult behaviours and attitudes they can exhibit at times can feel like an impossible challenge to overcome and parenting, caring for or teaching them may have little or no reward. It may feel like you are taking one step forward and two steps back.

Adopted children often have the emotional needs of a much younger child and as such may need to make up for what they missed out on during their early years.

For example, an older child may still want to be walked to the school gates; may like to engage in messy play such as finger painting, jumping in puddles and make models with Play Doh. These may appear strange however developmentally, this is what they need to do and will probably only last a short while.

## Understanding a child's feelings of attachment

Children's feelings can vary and here are some examples of the range of emotions they may feel within one day:

children who have not been in **control** of their past often seek to control their current world;

they can feel a deep sense of **shame**, believing what happened to them was their fault; they become scared of further rejection and therefore try to engineer situations to achieve the rejection they fear;

some work hard to be compliant and helpful but beneath their attempt to be good, there may be a traumatised child struggling continuously to 'fit in' to avoid further **hurt**;

many have been let down by adults in their life; they find it extremely difficult to **trust** others and then struggle to form friendships and attachments with those who try to care for them;

children finding it difficult to manage and make sense of their emotions signal that they need help via challenging behaviours which may be seen superficially as expressions of **anger** or rage.

children feeling **anxious** can struggle with listening as their mind is in a muddle so not open to new stimuli;

children may refuse to do work as they are **afraid** to fail or may struggle with it and then feel helpless and hopeless and these are feelings they are trying to avoid;

children may **panic** and constantly need reassurance and ask lots of questions, sometimes repetitively, as they are desperate to get it right; it is too 'dangerous' to get it wrong.

# What behaviours can result from attachment issues

Attachment type	Behaviour	What this means for the child
<b>INDICATORS OF ATTACHMENT DIFFICULTIES GENERALLY</b>	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.

## and what might you do?

Possible triggers	What might you do?
	Do praise but don't be too effusive and be specific about what you are praising. Privately may be more acceptable to child.
	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).
	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.
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.
	Avoid accusing child of lying or fantasising. State the truth of the matter briefly and simply.
Rejection by peers.	Do not insist on 'sorry'. Suggest an action that might repair damaged relationships. Try not to leave desirable things lying around!
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.

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# What behaviours can result from attachment issues

Attachment type	Behaviour	What this means for the child
<b>AVOIDANT</b> (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.
	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.
<b>AMBIVALENT</b> (I'm not ok, you're ok)	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.	I will feel shame and humiliation if my difficulties are discovered.
	Poor concentration, fidgeting, turning round.	I must scan the room all the time for danger. I must stay hyper-aroused. I dare not relax.
<b>DISORGANISED</b> (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 don't hurt me. I do not want to be exposed as stupid. You are horrible to adults.
	Sexually aggressive.	I know from past experience that sex=power and I want to be in control.

## and what might you do?

Possible triggers	What might you do?
	<p>Introduce a buddy system.            Consider 'circle of friends' approach.            Encourage the child to help around the school.</p>
Singled out for 1:1 support.	<p>Encourage work in pairs or small groups.            Ask the child to help another who is less able.</p>
	<p>Validate the child's feelings, 'I can see that you are angry...'. Help the child repair/restore where possible - together.</p>
Task that is hard/new/unusual.	<p>Have set routine. Make sure all first tasks are simple and achievable. Seat child close to you. Allow child to wait quietly.</p>
	<p>Notice the child explicitly. Give child something to look after for a while. Give child responsibilities for things (not people).</p>
Task that is hard/new/unusual.	<p>Small step differentiation.            Use timer to divide tasks.</p>
Sights, smells and sounds can trigger panic as reminders of past trauma.	<p>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.</p>
Task that is hard/new/unusual.	<p>Offer choices. Make sure both are acceptable!            Make lessons/tasks very structured (multiple choice/cloze/sentence completion).            All materials to hand</p>
	<p>Focus on modifying most serious behaviour.            Validate the child's feelings. 'I can see that you are angry/upset...'</p>
Task that is hard/new/unusual.	<p>Be assertive but keep emotional temperature down. Avoid showing anger, irritation and fear.            Start each day with a clean slate.</p>
Variety of stimuli including stress.	<p>Record all incidents very clearly. Seek advice from other agencies (see inside back cover).</p>

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## Hints and tips to create a strong school and family partnership

The most important thing is good communication between home and school. Here are some suggestions for parents and teachers to consider:

- arrange regular progress meetings where targets are set for the child. Ensure they are achievable, measurable and manageable to suit the child's levels/needs;
- consider having a named person in school the child feels comfortable and safe with for the times when the child needs reassurance;
- it is helpful if the school is aware of when birth family contact and any 'tough' anniversaries are due, as these may affect the child's emotional state and behaviour in school;
- look out for patterns in behaviours and learn what triggers these so you can learn what makes a child tick;
- adults around the child may need to help them to learn how to recognise their feelings and triggers. Use encouraging words such as "I wonder if you are feeling worried because the work was difficult?"
- communicate and share the personal achievements with one another even if they are small and don't just focus on any negative incidents. Ensure the message is the same from school and home. Do not battle against one another. The child will pick up on this and could be confused or play one against the other;
- plan for change and anticipate its impact on the child. Changes to school routine need to be supported such as beginnings and endings;





- try putting them at the front of the class or next to the teacher as a consequence then they are still part of the group and the feeling of rejection is not there;
- parents need to have a clear understanding of the school policies and discipline procedures and explain these to their child, on their level. It would be useful for parents and teachers to discuss the impact of school policies on the child and agree how to work with these;
- practice with them the behaviour that is expected at school. Use role play with realistic scenarios and share with them the correct way to respond to a situation. This will give them the opportunity to have choices and feel more in control should an incident arise;
- share any triggers or emotional outburst between one another, including exploring how it was dealt with to find what does and doesn't work for the child;
- try not to tell them not to be 'silly' or that 'it doesn't matter'. It may seem trivial to you but to the child it may really matter.

## Homework tips

Why not consider:

- having a set programme and times for when and where homework is to be done and make a diary of these dates;
- including breaks and allow for fun time at the end;
- if the child says they cannot do a task, offering help and practicing it with them until they build up enough confidence to go it alone;
- completing homework diary/book (if applicable) and write comments between school and home. Ensure the child knows you are doing this and why you have made the comments. Try to include positive comments; if you have to write a negative, don't brush over it. Talk it through with the child and talk about how it could be turned into a positive next time. You may need to rehearse this as they may not know or understand what is expected, especially if it has never been requested before;
- utilising homework clubs.

## Be aware of the potential triggers of curriculum topics

Parts of the curriculum have the potential to trigger difficult emotions and memories of distress for an adopted child. In order to help them prepare for and manage these emotions, we recommend parents and teachers get together to discuss a child's needs and how their respective styles can complement one another to help build children's confidence in their skills. They should have support when they find participation difficult and should feel valued and included at all times.

Rehearsal and role play of possible situations may help the child make the right choices when they presented with challenging areas such as:

- family trees or family history;
- child's personal/first memories and timelines;
- sex and relationship education;
- growth and development;
- photographs or baby/early years topics;
- changing in front of others for PE may be challenging;
- themes which include loss, failure or loneliness;
- PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education);
- guest speakers who discuss topics such as drugs, alcohol, personal safety and the law, their uniforms could trigger memories and emotions;
- celebration dates, religious beliefs and anniversary such as father's and mother's day, Christmas and Easter celebrations.

## References

With thanks to the following for the sharing of expertise in producing this booklet: Suffolk County Council; Theraplay Institute of America; Raj Singh Gill, Senior Educational Psychologist, Essex County Council.

## Further recommended reading

Bailey S. & Gill R.S. *Survival of the Nurtured: Attachment in School*, Essex Educational Psychology Service 2010.

*Stop Wasting My Time! Post Adoption Central Support: a practical guide with case studies.*

**Please contact the Essex County Council Post Adoption Team for copies of these information sources or for further advice and support generally; contact details overleaf.**

**This booklet is issued by**

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