

Welcoming an adopted child to your primary 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.

The process is not over once a child is first placed with their adoptive family. They are still legally a looked-after child until a judge grants an adoption order. At this stage the child may still be using their birth surname, there will be children's services involvement, and the prospective adoptive parents may not have full legal parental rights. Adoptive parents must wait at least 10 weeks to apply for an adoption order, and the process will usually take several months to be completed, or longer in some cases.

The average age of a child at adoption in 2020 was 3 years. This means that some adopted children entering primary school will only recently have been adopted, or may still be legally looked after, although they are living with their prospective adoptive parents.

Action Points

Talk to the child's parents about their child's legal status. Is the child legally adopted or still looked after? By what name will the child be known? Is this the same as their legal name and, if not, what procedures will be put in place to ensure that all staff know to use the preferred name? If the child's name is likely to change, how will that be handled?

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

Adoptive parents know their children's backgrounds. They may choose not to share all the details, but they are the best source of information on a child's needs. Meet with the parents before the child starts school, discuss what is known of the child's needs and work together to put an initial plan in place to support the child. Build in a cycle of reflection and review. Source training for all staff in areas such as attachment and FASD.

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), treat days, special days (such as Mothers' Day) and school trips difficult to manage and may need extra support. In addition, some curriculum topics can be difficult, e.g. topics on family, or life history.

Home-school communications: 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.

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 boxes/areas, 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 for whole schools and individual education professionals.

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