

adopted children in education

**Information for
school staff and parents**

Introduction

This booklet has been developed for teachers and staff in education who come into contact with adopted children and families. It aims to raise awareness of the needs of adopted children who may experience difficulties with school life and help promote a positive relationship between adoptive parents and teaching staff.

Adopted children and their families sometimes have strong feelings about the way in which the subject of adoption is dealt with in school. They may have experienced negative comments,

sometimes teasing and school projects that prove virtually impossible for many adopted children to complete.

This booklet will assist teachers and staff to help the adopted children they work with and enhance their adjustment in school. Teachers are vital to the child's feelings of worth in the classroom and we hope this booklet will help staff explain adoption to others as well as provide ideas to help other pupils, whether they are adopted or not.



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Adoption today

Adoption means that a child or children have become members of a new family on a permanent basis and all legal rights and responsibilities for them have passed to their adoptive parents. The new parent or parents have full parental responsibility and are committed to providing a loving, nurturing and permanent home for these children.

The majority of adopted children are removed from their birth parents and brought into the care system for reasons of neglect and abuse. They will have experienced periods of foster care, and once adopted often remain in indirect and,

increasingly, direct contact with their birth family.

The children carry with them a history of loss and separation. Many will have suffered considerable trauma. They may have lost trust in adults because they have been let down so badly in the past. They will have missed out on a great deal of emotional, social, physical and academic development.

Adopted children will be as diverse as all other children in the classroom. Most adjust well to adoptive family life and make progress in school.

What adoption can mean for children

Children who have been adopted have all experienced loss of birth family, including siblings, at least one foster family, friends, their previous school etc. This can invoke overwhelming feelings of rejection that may be rekindled at various times in their lives and can add to an adopted child's feeling of 'difference'.

Most children placed for adoption will have to come to terms with a painful history. Sometimes it can be hard for professionals to understand why behavioural difficulties may still persist.

Adopted children have two sets of parents - birth and adopted - and may have siblings living elsewhere. Their birth family may still be a real part of their lives through ongoing contact and this may be unsettling for all concerned in the short term, even though it may be healing in the long term.

Adopted children may have low self-esteem. They may have problems making or sustaining

friends and be unable to 'read' other children's behaviour. Sometimes they may choose inappropriate ways to make an impression on others. They may display a need to take control in a world in which they have had no control over what has happened to them.

Difficulties such as a lack of concentration or aggressive behaviour may sometimes be intense, extreme and long lasting. Such challenging behaviours are likely to be the result of previous life experiences. Please talk to their parents to gain a better understanding of the child's background, remembering that some information may be considered confidential to the family and the child.

Adopted children may have experienced a number of placements and carers before permanently joining their new family for adoption. Their education may have been disrupted as a result.

Continuity and routine is important for adopted children and change can be very unsettling e.g. change of class, school or teacher. Hyper-vigilance due to insecurity is common amongst adopted children and this may interfere with their short-term memory and learning.

Playtimes can often be stressful due to their unstructured and unpredictable nature and children may need extra help to manage this time.

Attachment issues

This describes a variety of behaviours which may be an issue for many children in your school, not just adopted children, and are related to children's early experiences of being parented. They may arise when a child has lost his/her 'primary carer' and has experienced emotional abandonment in early years.

These behaviours can show themselves in many ways – children may become over anxious to please, in order to avoid another rejection. Some act out their chaotic feelings with chaotic behaviour. Others turn in on their own pain and withdraw,

unable to relate to others. All these behaviours can present problems in the school setting.

A child with attachment issues may be dealing with:

- Panic
- Rage
- Desperate efforts to please
- Loss
- Identity issues
- Fear of another rejection or abandonment

Examples of behaviours that can result from attachment issues and possible causes are listed overleaf.

Attachment issues... cont'd

Behaviours	Possible reasons why
Poor concentration	Apprehensive, feelings of panic as reminders of the past
Talking all the time	Life feels safer that way
Ignoring instructions	Too much anxiety to be able to listen
Lying, stealing, secret lives	Life may feel like a lie, not knowing the difference between fantasy and reality
Turning round	Danger may come from behind
Constantly asking of the teacher apparently trivial questions	It feels too dangerous to 'get it wrong'
Refusal to be helped with new work	'I was left helpless - I'll never be helpless again'
Disruptive behaviour	Contact with birth family may be happening soon or has just happened

Things to be aware of - possible difficulties that might arise in school

Here are some examples of potential issues relating to the National Curriculum and daily life in school.

Growth and development –

Children may be asked to bring in photos or articles of clothing from when they were babies. This may not be possible if those items have not been passed on to the adoptive parents.

Family tree – The child may face a dilemma about how to represent their origins. This is also true for children within stepfamilies and in the ‘Looked After’ system.

Sex Education/PSHE – Adopted children need to feel a sense of value about themselves and some may feel stigmatised by their background circumstances. If an adopted child has experienced sexual abuse in the past, their knowledge and awareness may be heightened and they may make inappropriate comments. Offer de-briefings after any lesson.

Discussions about drug or alcohol abuse may raise fears for adopted children about the well being of members of their birth family, who have had these difficulties.

Sports/PE/Dance – Children who have experienced sexual abuse may be reluctant to get undressed or get changed for sport activities.

Separation – The longer a child is separated from their new family the more anxious and unsettled they may feel. Afternoons in school can be particularly stressful. Parents can help to alleviate this by giving their child a ‘transitional object’ to take to school e.g. a note from the parents in their lunchbox or a photograph in their bag.

Literature – Recognise that certain texts, although excellent and valuable, can evoke complex feelings and memories. Such examples are ‘Goodnight Mr Tom’ and the ‘Harry Potter’ books.



Things to be aware of... cont'd

Race and ethnicity – Some children will have been adopted by parents whose race and ethnicity is different to their own, especially if the parents adopted from abroad. Sensitivity will be required to help children celebrate their identity in ways that value their own ethnic origin and that of their new family. Discussion with parents will help to clarify what is appropriate to

reflect the full range of the child's needs.

Sponsorship schemes – Recognise that some “adoption” schemes for abandoned or mistreated animals may convey difficult and even offensive messages to adopted children and their families. Consider using the term “sponsorship” rather than “adoption” on these occasions.

What teachers can do to help

- Set the tone for acceptance of adoption as a valid way to build families.

This is probably the most important thing you can do for adopted children, because your acceptance will go a long way toward helping others to accept it. As the traditional structure of families has changed, teachers play an important part in increasing the acceptance of all family structures, including adoption.

- Provide accurate general information about adoption.

Adoption can be discussed in a matter of fact way during lessons about family life, inherited characteristics and literature that includes adoption or foster care.

- Be sensitive to school lessons that may be difficult for adopted children to complete.

They may reveal differences in their background or highlight missing information. Such lessons may pose challenges

for the children of single parents, same sex parents, step-parents and grandparent carers as well. Discuss this with their parents prior to these topics taking place, so that their parents can help prepare them.

Such topics include:

- Family trees
- Personal biographies
- Baby pictures
- Inherited characteristics
- Ancestors
- Medical history
- Geography lessons
- Birth data
- Family holidays
- Mother's Day and Father's Day

Widen the choices about the way in which they are completed – loving trees or family circles rather than family trees; making cards or gifts for a favourite relative rather than just mum or dad; allowing children to report on someone else in the family or a famous person rather than themselves.

- Support adopted children when they are asked questions about adoption.
Step in and support the child just as you would if you overheard intrusive questions regarding race, divorce or other family issues.
- Be prepared to advocate for adopted children if the situation requires it.
Step in and stop taunting or invasive questions. An attack on the child's family goes to the core of their being.
- Provide regular communication to adoptive parents, particularly in the early stages of joining a new school or class.
- If changes are happening at school use a familiar member of staff as a link or support person for the child to help reduce their anxiety.
- Share with parents a clear and honest picture of the child's potential as far as academic achievement and social skills are concerned.
- Provide information to parents about the kinds of help that are available for children in the education setting and involve your SENCO or school psychology service, if necessary.
- Be aware of short-term memory problems. Use strategies to relieve anxiety and stress e.g. direct communication with parents rather than via the child.
- Be aware that birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas or other festivals can awaken complex feelings of confusion, loss and sadness as well as happiness.
- Personal revelations by children should be treated sensitively.
- Be sensitive to the issues for adopted children, even though you may not be aware of such a child in your class - there may be one or more.
- Don't press parents for details of the child's history – this is personal information.
- Treat all given information with the utmost confidentiality – it's not yours to share.
- Remember that when first placed children will always have their own Social Worker. Your school will have their details and they can be contacted with worries or concerns.

Partnership between school and home

- Identify a key figure in school e.g. TA, SENCO, Head teacher who will be responsible for communicating with parents.
- Identify a member of staff to help with the transition from home to school. Provide a refuge to 'check in'.
- Predictability will help a child feel safe and contained. Children can avoid unpleasant surprises by having help to plan their day.
- Key worker needs to be available whenever the child needs them. This may decrease over time.

Offer to parents

- Curriculum overview for the term.
- Sensitivity around key dates, birthdays, religious festivals etc.
- Understanding there may be particular triggers in a pupil's history that may cause behavioral or emotional problems.
- Allow pupils to bring a transitional object with them into school.

What parents need to think about

- Ask for an initial meeting with key staff.
- Think about who needs to know that the child is adopted and what background information they may need.
- Have regular communication with school staff and try not to let difficulties develop.
- Ask how the school will monitor the child's progress.

Be sensitive to the needs of adoptive parents

Adoptive parents experience an exciting but rapid and demanding learning curve when their children are first placed. Like all new parents they may have some problems adjusting to parenthood no matter how much they welcome the child's arrival. Please consider what you can do to help them understand the school and education system.

Adoptive parents are not just dealing with bringing up a child but a great deal more:

- Instant parenthood and perhaps the placement of more than one child at a time, possibly with different ages and different needs.
- Less opportunity to establish a support network with other parents.
- Often no gradual introduction to the education system via playgroup/nursery.
- A range of social, emotional and behavioural reactions to deal with, including their own, the child's and those of family and friends.
- If a child is experiencing difficulties in school, parents are likely to be concerned by the negative feelings expressed by other parents.
- New parents don't always have the information the school requires.
- They may feel different from other parents, at least initially.

Adoption continues to be a valid and valued way to build a loving, caring family. Positive attitudes from school staff and an environment that is comfortable with, and shows respect for difference, will help to promote the health and well being of all the children in your school, including those who have been adopted.

Adoption Support in Camden

Our adoption team offers an adoption support service and has access to specialist services.

If you would like further information, advice or a consultation with a member of the team please call 020 7974 3082 or email adoption@camden.gov.uk

Camden Adoption Support Service
Family Services and Social Work
London Borough of Camden
Crowndale Centre
218 Eversholt Street
London NW1 1BD
www.camden.gov.uk/adoption

If you do not live in the London Borough of Camden, we would be happy to assist you by signposting appropriate Adoption Support Services via your own Local Authority.



020 7974 3082 adoption@camden.gov.uk

Some useful reading

Dr Heather Geddes (2005)

Attachment in the classroom: The link between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school.

Louise Bomber (2007)

Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies to supporting children with attachment difficulties in school.

Kate Cairns (2004)

Learn the Child. Helping looked after children to learn. A good practice guide for social workers, carers and teachers.

Vera Fahlberg (1994)

A Child's Journey through Placement

Dan Hughes (1999)

Building the Bonds of Attachment

Caroline Archer (1999)

Parenting the Child Who Hurts

Some useful resources

Post Adoption Centre
5 Torriano Mews
London NW5 2RZ
Advice Line: 020 7284 5879
www.postadoptioncentre.org.uk

Adoption UK
46 The Green
South Bar Street
Banbury
Oxfordshire
0844 848 7900
www.adoptionuk.org.uk

BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering)
Saffron House
6-10 Kirby Street
London EC1N 8TS
020 7421 2600
www.baaf.org.uk



020 7974 3082 adoption@camden.gov.uk



If you would like this leaflet in large print, Braille, on audiotape or in another language, please phone 020 7974 6649.

Camden Adoption and Permanence Team
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