

Understanding Attachment Difficulties

Joint Advice from the National Association of Head Teachers and Adoption UK

Why is this important?

One in 10 children has suffered some form of neglect in their short life. That could mean that as many as three children in every classroom are trying to cope with attachment-related issues. And, of course, many more will have experienced loss as the result of death or separation.

Adoption today is very different from what it was 30 years ago. Many of today's adopted children will have come from a background of abuse and/or neglect and may have experienced many moves through the care system. These children's needs do not change the moment they are adopted.

Adopted children's attainment in school is significantly lower than other students. In 2013, only 49% of adopted children reached their expected levels at Key Stage 2, while 75% of their peers achieved expected levels.

Adoptive families repeatedly express concern about the difficulties their children face in schools. In fact, 80% of Adoption UK's members believe that their children need more support in schools because of their early childhood experiences. All looked-after children will have suffered some form of loss – with many having also suffered abuse and/or neglect.

So what is the impact of such a difficult start in life and how is it likely to play out in the classroom?

“There is considerable evidence for changes in brain function in association with child abuse and neglect... Hyper arousal, aggressive responses, dissociative reactions, difficulties with aspects of executive functions and educational underachievement thus begin to be better understood.”

Dr D Glaser, Consultant Paediatric Psychiatrist, Great Ormond Street Hospital

Neuroscience has established that the way we are cared for in the womb and in early childhood affects how our brain develops.

Consistently 'good enough' loving relationships and low stress levels in early childhood build a brain that equips us to learn, share, empathise, regulate our feelings, feel good about ourselves and others, and withstand everyday stresses. On the other hand, traumatic early experiences can affect both our ability to form trusting relationships and develop healthy, well functioning brains.

"The brain systems responsible for healthy emotional relationships will not develop in an optimal way without the right kinds of experiences at the right times of life."

Dr Bruce Perry

Think about how any adopted child functions in school. Many adopted children have good enough thinking and reasoning skills when they are calm, but when they feel anxious or stressed, they can 'lose the plot'. Working to ensure that they feel safe and calm helps all of the brain work better.

Typical complexities affecting children

1. Developmental trauma

The term 'developmental trauma disorder' can cover any number of difficulties that arise when a child's development is affected in the womb and/or by neglect and abuse after birth. Scientific research shows that this type of complex trauma can impact on every area of a child's development, from their physical health to their thinking, feelings, behaviour, sense of self and ability to form attachments. Two effects that we see frequently in adopted children are Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), which is a pre-birth trauma, and attachment difficulties that occur after birth.

2. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

FASD is an umbrella term that describes a range of physical and neurological birth defects caused by a woman drinking while pregnant. It is the most common preventable cause of learning difficulties.

Many children who do not display the physical characteristics are often undiagnosed until they show difficulties at school, or are never diagnosed at all. People with FASD do not grow out of it.

Children with FASD can appear bright, articulate and confident, but there are parts of their brain that just do not work well and they can quickly become frustrated, angry and display negative behaviour traits. As these behaviours result from deficits in brain functioning and are beyond the child's control, 'normal' discipline does not improve the child's behaviour and, in fact, may make it worse.

3. Attachment difficulties

Healthy attachments are essential to a child developing well at home, in school, and in wider society. The word 'attachment' can be described as a deep bond between a child and their caregiver that binds them in space, endures over time and creates a sense of safety and stability. Although nobody is born attached, we are born with the drive to form attachments, primarily with our birth mother.

All adopted children will have experienced attachment disruption, often as the result of maternal deprivation, neglect, illness, multiple carers, abuse and/or frequent moves through the care system. As such, these children tend to have an insecure attachment style that results in an anxious, avoidant, angry/ambivalent or disorganised way of relating to others and the world.

“Schools and other education providers should ensure that all staff who may come into contact with children and young people with attachment difficulties receive appropriate training on attachment difficulties.”

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guideline [NG26] on children’s attachment (November 2015)

Attachment difficulties can make it hard for children to...

- Gain the confidence and the self-motivation that comes from exploring the world from a safe base
- Achieve developmental milestones
- Reach their intellectual potential
- Behave in a socially acceptable way
- Think logically
- Develop a conscience, have empathy
- Become self-reliant
- Cope with stress, frustration, fear, worry
- Develop good relationships with peers and teachers
- Feel like a worthwhile person

4. Developmental gaps

Insecurely attached children often feel, think and act much younger than their chronological age. Gaps in their development can create challenges for them at school, where they are expected to behave with the same maturity as their securely attached peers. This can be frustrating for a child who may have the concentration and stimulation levels of a much younger child and may need learning tools, play activities, nurture, supervision, targets and boundaries appropriate to their developmental, rather than their chronological age.

5. Executive functions

Executive functions are a set of mental processes that help us to learn. We use them to solve problems, remember, manage time and space, plan, organise, start and change activities, set goals and stay on task long enough to achieve them. They also help us to regulate feelings.

6. Toxic stress and anxiety

A little stress is motivating but adopted children will have endured unrelieved bouts of stress that had a toxic effect on their development. This is due mainly to a chemical called cortisol. In quick bursts of stress the body produces adrenalin but when stress is prolonged or chronic, cortisol takes over. High levels of cortisol in early years can cause sensory integration problems and traumatised children can develop anticipatory stress where they expect bad things to happen.

7. Sensory issues

Everyone has occasional sensory integration or processing challenges when the brain is overloaded by sensory information, or deprived of it. But some people go through daily life unable to process and integrate effectively the sensory information they receive through the seven senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, body awareness and movement/balance. Adopted children may fall into this category as developmental trauma affects all areas of a child’s functioning. They may get labeled as ‘badly behaved’.

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What does this mean for school leaders?

School leaders can help to transform the support they and their colleagues give to children by simply considering the following suggestions:

- Implementing a system that identifies children affected by attachment issues
- Introducing policies that underpin the importance of being attachment-aware
- Developing a whole-school strategy to support children with attachment issues
- Providing colleagues with the necessary information, advice, and training
- Demonstrating to Ofsted that the Pupil Premium is being invested in the best interests of affected pupils and the whole school
- Joining Adoption UK's schools' membership programme to help with all of the above.

How can these issues be managed in classrooms?

The school environment may be so stimulating that some children shift constantly between alert and alarm. When a traumatised child enters a room or a different area, they need time to check it out before settling to learn.

Within the class, seating position is important. It depends on the child, but most feel safest near the teacher, with their back to the wall and from where they can see the door and scan the room easily.

Lack of structure can feel very unsafe so it pays to supervise closely in dinner queues, the dining hall and the playground. The child's visual planner can be extended to cover playtime, 'golden time' and more creative lessons where the usual restrictions are dropped.

Bruce Perry recommends quiet periods during the day to allow the brain to 'catch up', process new experiences, improve memory and attention. Movement breaks also help concentration.

The focus of a traumatized child's attention in the classroom is always the adults. Where is the teacher/classroom assistant? What is she doing? Is she angry? Has she forgotten me? How can I remind her I'm here? Adults determine how safe the classroom feels. You might think you shout occasionally, but it can feel to them like you are always shouting. Teachers who are mindful of children's needs create a climate of safety.

Helpful suggestions for teachers

- Hold the child in mind. Children with attachment difficulties are often branded 'attention seeking', because they can't bear to be left alone and need to know they are held in mind at all times
- 'Check in' with the child at regular intervals. Use sensory reminders of your presence like wearing a jingly bracelet or a specific perfume. You can also timetable daily or weekly hide and seek sessions for the class. Hide and seek teaches a child that people leave and come back, that people exist even when they can't see them, and that they (the child) exists even when you can't see them

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- Try to think less about managing behaviour and more about reducing anxiety - reducing anxiety will lead to better behavior
- Children learn much better when they feel safe – emotionally and physically
- Children may act much younger than their years. Because difficult things happened to them when they were young, parts of their development just got stuck
- Children are not good with change or surprises. They need a timetable for their day, so they know what is coming next
- Don't take children's behaviour personally; it is not personal and it is not deliberate. Model how you want children to behave. Teachers who pick up on their feelings may begin to feel anxious, demoralised, or deskilled. Please seek help if this happens. Supportive teachers can make a real and lasting difference to children's lives.

NAHT is supporting Adoption UK in its campaign to make every school attachment-aware

A change is coming – are you ready?

The Children and Social Work Bill 2016 is making its way through Parliament. Part of its aim is to ensure that teachers understand the impact of developmental issues, including trauma and loss, on all children's learning by expanding the role of virtual school heads and considering how designated teachers can best support adopted children.

Further support is available from Adoption UK

Adoption UK is the leading charity providing awareness and understanding for those parenting or supporting children who cannot live with their birth parents. We are consistently rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted.

We can help you to demonstrate to Ofsted that your Pupil Premium is being invested in the best interests of your pupils and your school.

We know that children with attachment issues are capable of causing significant disruption. We also know that they do not often respond to the traditional methods of sanction and reward.

We can supply your school with practical strategies to improve your children's well-being and their chances of fulfilling their academic potential. This, in turn, is likely to create classrooms that are calmer and more productive.

By doing all of these things together, we can also help to maintain trust and confidence in the parent-teacher relationship.

The benefits of Adoption UK's schools' membership programme

Training and resources

- Discounts on Adoption UK's training courses
- A directory of other approved training providers (with discounts for members)
- Access to a library of specialist publications

Guidance

- Guidance on writing Education Health and Care Plans for adopted children
- Guidance on writing Individual Education Plans for adopted children
- A range of free publications
- Access to lists of recommended resources

Awareness-raising

- Contribute to our education blog on the Adoption UK website, and share best practice on our dedicated education forum
- Promotion of attachment-related issues through our press releases, articles, and broadcast interviews

Influencing

- Work with us to form stronger relationships between virtual schools' heads, head teachers, and designated teachers
- Help to shape national education policies on attachment issues through our influence with UK Governments

Prices

The one, two and three year schools' membership prices (exclusive of VAT) are:

One year membership **£225**

Two year membership **£400** 10% discount

Three year membership **£540** 20% discount

How to apply

Visit www.adoptionuk.org/schoolsmembership to download a copy of the application form.

Call **01295 752250** or email membership@adoptionuk.org.uk if you have a question.

