

What every teacher needs to know

Adoptive parent and writer Anne O'Connor produced this factsheet for adopters to use in schools and to help them to work alongside professionals on some of the issues which may affect looked- after or adopted children.

It is a sad truth that for many adoptive and foster families, difficulties in getting school and childcare personnel to appreciate the particular challenges our children face, can tip us over the edge and ultimately threaten our relationship with our children. Together, we can make the difference our children so desperately need. Whether or not our children are currently presenting with special needs or challenging behaviours, these are the important things we want you to know.

Love is enough?

Since the 1960s, the focus of adoption practice has shifted to finding homes for children 'looked after' by local authorities because their families are deemed unable to provide adequate parenting. These children may have experienced neglect or abuse - and all will have experienced the trauma of being removed from their birth families. They may also have had several changes of carer before being placed for adoption.

The work of John Bowlby and others in the field of attachment theory has had a big impact on fostering and adoption practice. Advances in neuroscience have also given us greater understanding of the effects of trauma on the developing brain. And yet there is still a belief that simply removing a child from harm and placing them with a loving, caring family, makes everything all right. Sadly, it is not that simple.

We are all quite rightly outraged and full of sympathy when headlines scream of children dying at the hands of their abusive families. However, there is much less sympathy for the children fortunate enough to be 'saved', who are taken into care or adopted and then act out their distress in anti-social or challenging ways as they grow older.

Perhaps you would too, in similar circumstances. Many of the behaviours shown by traumatised children in care are a direct (and rational) response to their experiences. Would you be able to relax and 'fit in' if you didn't know how long you were going to stay somewhere? In a place where the sounds and smells and expectations of you were very different from those you previously knew? When you don't really understand why you are there and why the only people you knew are no longer around you and possibly gone for good? If you had been let down by the people who were supposed to keep you safe, would you find it easy to trust people again and to allow them to take control of your life?

As an adult in these circumstances, it would seem good sense to be wary of new people and not get too attached to them; to be hypervigilant and always watching out for danger and new threats to your well being; to be self-sufficient and resist the help of others if you can't be sure you can trust them. And yet, society seems to expect children to just be happy to have a new mummy and daddy, to forget what went before and to embrace their new family life with as little fuss as possible.

Therapeutic re-parenting

This is not to suggest that all children in the care system or who are adopted will have problems. However, society does them and their families a disservice if we don't take into consideration the impact that such experiences may have had. The term 'therapeutic re-parenting' is increasingly used to describe the complexity of the role of foster carer / adoptive parent and social services ensure we receive training and preparation for this role.

The quality of this can be varied, however, as can the training given to the social workers who deal with us. Schools have a legal responsibility towards 'looked-after children' – but not once they are adopted. But their needs are not likely to change overnight, even if they appear to be well-attached.

Attachment theory and trauma

You probably know some of this from your training. It is fundamental to understanding our children. Secure attachments provide a safe base for a child, reducing fearfulness and stress as they learn to trust that their needs will be met. As well as providing emotional security, positive attachment experiences help build neural pathways and bathe the brain in 'feel-good' hormones.

Where those experiences are lacking, the child has no sense of security, their neural development is suppressed and stress hormones constantly flood their brain. This means that they have a very small window of stress tolerance and are constantly on alert for threats to their survival.

This is why experts now believe neglect can have as profound an impact as abuse. A child doesn't need to have a conscious memory of a trauma or a loss to be negatively affected by it.

Acknowledging the trauma involved in being removed from one's birth family, no matter how early and in what circumstances, is a useful way of reminding ourselves of what our children are battling with.

Behaviours

This all paints a very gloomy picture, but please don't forget that our children have many strengths and survival skills. They have a lot to teach us about resilience and the 'plasticity' of the brain, which enables them, in the right environment, to re-learn many of the things that were denied to them in their early life. In the process, they will communicate their needs to us in the most powerful way they can, which is through their behaviours – many of which will be challenging and tiresome.

A lot of repetitive and frustrating behaviours are actually signals of distress, at varying levels. A child with 'good enough' attachment experiences will know that if they are out of sorts, a caring adult will help them regulate. A child without those positive experiences is likely to feel dysregulated often, and to have had to find ways to soothe themselves. Some examples seem obvious, such as rocking, head banging, scratching or skin picking. But burping and spitting, soiling and wetting, constant chattering, baby talk, humming or strange noises, hoarding or stealing, and frenzied physical activity are also common and often not recognised as symptoms of distress.

They are also attention-seeking behaviours in the most literal sense – these children need to know that we won't forget about them! Their early experiences have taught them that for survival, any kind of attention is better than no attention.

Now imagine how you might feel if you were repeatedly told to stop doing something that you knew helped to make you feel better? Your stress levels immediately rise and inevitably you feel compelled to do it even more! It is really important that we tune into these children to find out what's going on for them and to respond - not react - to their signals, tiresome and frustrating though some of them may be. Please put yourself in their shoes and try and understand the underlying fear and stress that triggers their behaviour.

- Look for safe ways to allow them to do what they need to do, while you gently provide them with alternative soothing strategies and ways to self-regulate.
- Whatever their actual age, their neurological development is likely to be stuck at a much earlier stage. Responding to behaviour in the way you would with a much younger child is likely to create a better response. Remember they are communicating to us the emotional age they 'need' to be, in that moment.
- It helps also to see unwanted behaviour as evidence of their dysregulation and to recognise that often it is not that they won't conform, but that they can't – their brains aren't yet wired up in a way that will allow them to.
- A lot of traditional behaviour approaches revolve around rewards and sanctions and where love and affection is conditional on good behaviour. We need you to think about how rewards and strategies such as 'time out' might affect a child who has experienced rejection and abandonment and doesn't believe themselves to be worthy of love and treats.
- What they need most of all is unconditional love and acceptance that slowly builds their concept of themselves as someone who is entitled to the nurture and care that they have missed out on, regardless of their behaviours.
- While they go through this process, they need the adults around them to provide 'emotional containment' to help them deal with the feelings that can completely overwhelm them.
- We will help you to recognise their triggers – some will be hard to fathom, but at the root of most behaviours will lie fear and feelings of being unsafe.
- A child may have very real feelings of threat, which might be hard for us to appreciate – a sound, a smell, a raised voice. Some respond to perceived threats with an aggressive 'fight' reaction but others may 'freeze' by glazing over or being slow to respond.
- Some children's needs may be masked by their coping strategies. Overcompliance can be just as much of an indicator of need as aggression or defiance. The child's fear of rejection drives them to conform at all costs.
- Transitions and change of any kind can be unsettling for a child who has never experienced constancy and who may have traumatic memories of change. These memories may not always be conscious, particularly if they occurred when they were pre-verbal, but they are powerful nonetheless. Please think about how you organise the day so that routines help build security and how you make yourself physically and emotionally available at potentially stressful times of the day.
- It seems obvious, but be sensitive about topics and projects that involve photos and information about family trees and babyhood. A child may not have photos from their early life, or those they have may trigger difficult emotions. Please ask us and we can advise you how you can maybe adjust the topic so that they can be included in safe ways.

We really appreciate everything you do for our children and hope that by helping you to understand them; we can make it easier for you to work with them. Thank you for reading this.

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