



# Let's learn together

By Sheila Lavery

A guide for parents  
and teachers of  
adopted children in  
primary school  
in Scotland

**adoptionuk**  
for every adoptive family

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# Introduction

**T**his booklet was originally commissioned by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Board.

This version has been amended to reflect the current policies and legislation as relevant to Scotland. The original was written by an adopter and it has been updated by an adopter, with contributions from other adoptive parents, using recommendations from internationally renowned experts on trauma and attachment, plus a wealth of information from Adoption UK and Enquire. Its purpose is to give adoptive parents and teachers an insight into how early relational trauma affects brain development, why school can be challenging for adopted children, and how we can help to improve the experience for all children by paying attention to the needs of the most vulnerable.


**Although the** focus is adoption, the information also applies to looked after children and any child living with loss and the effects of trauma. Certain common areas of difficulty are highlighted and various tips and ideas suggested. However, not all of the information is relevant to all adopted children all of the time, so feel free to pick and mix what works for your child, revisit and revise often and strive to be an equal partner in your child's education. We parents know our children better than anyone and our insight is a valuable asset to the teaching and support staff in school.

**As our** children look to us to give them a sense of safety and self worth, it is

worth remembering that our attitude towards them and our relationship with the school can make a huge difference to how well they manage the whole experience. This "attitude" is critical regardless of whether or not our children qualify for additional support in school, so it is emphasised throughout the booklet. The section at the back focuses on additional support needs and guides you through the process of securing support for your child.

**Finally, because** few teachers have a working knowledge of attachment and developmental trauma, there are some separate teacher information sheets in the back cover, which can be copied and distributed to teachers. Hopefully, this information should help the school develop a better understanding of your child's needs.

**This small** booklet is by no means an exhaustive resource, but the aim is to give you the beginnings of a toolkit. Use the resources and the contacts listed to add to this, trust your instincts, and avail yourself of any support on offer and you will be well equipped to help your child through primary school. Good luck and keep up the great work.



**Please note:** All the case histories and quotes from parents in this booklet are genuine, but names and details have been changed to protect confidentiality. All photos are posed by models. The terms, he, she and they are used interchangeably throughout the booklet and are not intended to discriminate.

## A big thank you to...

**Sheila Lavery** for giving permission for use of her original booklet. **The North Berwick** cluster of schools who used Education Scotland's attainment fund to allow us to update this booklet to reinforce the work we did together to improve attachment aware practice in their schools. **Kathy Allan**, our project consultant, **Alison Parkinson** and other **Adoption UK** staff who contributed time, expertise and ideas to the project. The **adoptive parents** who contributed their experiences and ideas. **Enquire** for checking facts and updating details about additional support needs and the **Scottish Child Law Centre** for checking relevant legislation.

Thanks to all for making such a useful booklet more relevant for Scottish parents.

**Fiona Aitken**, Director, Adoption UK in Scotland.

# Development and developmental trauma

**“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

**N**euroscience 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.

Traumatic experiences can be defined as anything a child experiences as life threatening. This does not have to be abuse; neglect alone can cause the damage. Imagine yourself as a tiny infant, completely dependent on your mother to keep you alive and you get an idea of how being separated from her could feel life-threatening.

The human brain is not fully developed at birth, it continues to grow after birth, reaching 80-90 per cent of its adult size in the first three years of

## Amygdala

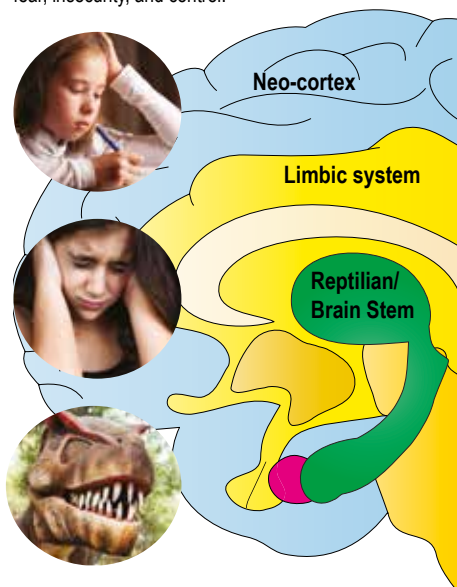
The amygdala is a part of the limbic system involved in processing emotional responses. Trauma expert B. van der Kolk calls it the smoke alarm of the brain. Our children have extremely sensitive smoke alarms, so the slightest whiff of stress can put them into a state of alarm.



life. It develops from bottom up and from inside out, starting with the brain stem.

**The brain stem** (primitive brain) controls basic functions like breathing, blood pressure, plus fear, rage and regulation. For a child developing in a high-stress environment, the regulatory abilities of the brain stem are already impaired at birth.

**The limbic system** is the emotional centre of the brain, built on the brain stem. It becomes wired by experiences in the first year of life. Children born into loving homes have a limbic system wired for love, security and dependence while being born into a hostile environment creates a limbic system wired for fear, insecurity, and control.



The **neo-cortex** or 'thinking' brain continues to develop into adulthood. It processes information from both the brain stem and the limbic system. When children experience abuse, neglect or abandonment at an early age, fear and stress flood the brain stem and/or limbic systems. The resulting developmental trauma impacts on the neo-cortex, causing problems with attachments and executive functioning skills, (see pages 7&10).

Think about how your child functions in school. Many of our 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 they feel safe and calm helps all of the brain work better.

### Bottom-up rewiring

Although our children's experiences have impacted on their brain development, they can still make good progress at school and at home when we parents, teachers and carers change our attitude and expectations. Quite simply, we need to rewire the brain from the bottom up by relating to traumatised children of all ages with the attitude we would use with babies and toddlers, accepting that there are some things they cannot do despite their chronological age. This developmental approach is intensive and lengthy. It can take many years to repair the damage caused by neglect in infancy.



**"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 MD, PhD, Child Psychologist



### Developmental trauma

The relatively new term "developmental trauma disorder" is used to cover any number of difficulties that can arise when a child's development becomes somewhat derailed either in the womb and/or by neglect and abuse after birth. We now know from scientific research 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 which occur after birth.



# Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

**F**oetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term used to describe a range of physical and neurological birth defects caused by a woman drinking alcohol while pregnant.

FASD is the most common preventable cause of learning difficulties known to doctors. If you have a child diagnosed with FASD, you may already know quite a lot about the disorder, but 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. So a diagnosis is critical in increasing understanding of their difficulties, getting support in school and helping them to develop essential life skills.

Children with FASD can appear bright, articulate and

confident, but there are parts of their brain that just don't work well and they can quickly become frustrated, angry and behave badly. As these behaviours result from deficits in brain functioning and are beyond the child's control, parents and teachers may find that "normal" discipline does not change the child's behaviour and may actually make it worse as the child can feel frustrated and confused.

## An invisible disability

**Alcohol causes neurological damage such as:**

- Developmental delay
- Memory problems
- Difficulty storing and retrieving information
- Inconsistent performance ('on' and 'off' days)
- Impulsivity, distractibility, disorganisation
- Ability to repeat instructions, but inability to put them into action
- Difficulty with abstract concepts, such as maths, money and time
- Slower thinking skills
- Slower hearing pace (may only understand every third word of normal conversation)
- Developmental gaps (may act younger than chronological age)
- Inability to predict outcomes or understand consequences
- Inability to interpret and respond appropriately to social situations.

**"My son has FASD and is in mainstream school. He struggles with friendships and can be overwhelmed by stimulating environments, even bright wall displays distress him. He can't bear people touching him so he goes to the front or the back of the class line. In class he sits beside the teacher, which gives him the close supervision he needs. He was made a P1 mentor, and he gets out of class 20 minutes early at lunchtime to set up play equipment for Primary 1. The responsibility is good for him and it means he's not lonely at breaks. He needs routine and doesn't cope well with change. School works best when teachers communicate with me and each other as any change to rules, routine or strategies throws him completely."**

**World Health Organisation figures suggest that:**

- 1 in 100 have FASD
- Many more remain undiagnosed

Key findings from the Infant Feeding Survey show that in England in 2010, of the women who drank before pregnancy, 48% gave up (33% in 2005) while they were pregnant and 47% (62% in 2005) said they cut down on the amount drunk, while 2% reported no change/ drank more (4% in 2005).

# Attachment difficulties

**H**ealthy attachments are essential to a child developing well at home, school and in wider society. The word attachment can be described as a deep and supportive bond between a child and his 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. Attachments are formed in infancy through the meeting of physical and emotional needs. All babies have needs. If a baby's caregiver recognises and meets those needs consistently in the first year of life, then the baby begins to trust that their needs will be met. This trust creates a secure attachment, which gives a child a safe base from which to explore the world around him and return to when he needs comfort and safety.

## The power of the primary attachment

Our children will not have had this chance to build attachment security and that can make life hard for them. This is because the first attachment between birth mother and baby is critical to survival, so it is the one that sets the template for all other relationships in life. All adopted children will have experienced disruptions to this cycle caused by maternal deprivation, neglect, illness, multiple carers, abuse and/or frequent moves through the care system. As a result, they tend to have an insecure attachment style that shows up as an anxious, avoidant, angry/ambivalent or disorganised way of relating to others and the world.

They are also likely to have found alternative ways of trying to get their



**"Hours in infancy have more power to shape us than months in middle age."**

Dr. Bruce Perry

**Adoptive parents need to be as...**

- Physically present
- Emotionally available
- Responsive
- Caring

**... as you would be with a baby**

needs met. We tend to call these behaviours "attachment difficulties". For example, they may try to get their needs met by being loud, demanding, clingy, aggressive, controlling or safety seeking, or sometimes by simply "switching off" and waiting until it is safe to make their needs known.

This is not their fault; it is their "internal working model" of how they learned to survive in an unsafe world. When our children come into our homes, they cannot easily change the way they think, feel and behave. Only through a process of intensive reparenting can we help them feel safe enough to relax and learn new ways of relating in the world.

## 10 ways to build a better attachment

1. Help your child feel safe by being calm, consistent, predictable and repetitive
2. Be available, responsive and caring - nurture as you would a baby or toddler
3. Look for and validate the feelings behind behaviours before disciplining
4. Share lots of fun, playful, low-key activities
5. Parent the child based on their emotional age
6. Model and teach good emotional control
7. Listen with empathy to your child, acknowledge their difficulties and validate their worries
8. Have realistic expectations; Think of what your child has lived through and how you would feel and behave if it had happened to you
9. Be kind and patient with yourself - you have needs too!
10. Take good care of yourself and make good use of available support

# What makes adoption different?

Although attachment difficulties are perceived as problems with close relationships, the damage may be much more pervasive. Attachment difficulties can leave a child feeling...>>

Think about how your children behave at home and in school because their behaviour is the language they developed before they had words to name their needs and feelings. Behaviour continues to be the adopted child's first language.

**I cannot trust adults to give me what I need**

**I am no good**

**The world is scary**

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

- Explore the world from a safe base
- Be confident, well motivated
- 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.

*With thanks to Vera Fahlberg*

**How might a child like this feel and behave in school when they are away from their attachment figure for several hours a day, competing for adult attention with up to 30 other children, having their work and behaviour criticised and trying to manage dozens of relationships?**



# Developmental gaps

**A** **adopted children** often feel, think and act much younger than their chronological age. It's as if they get 'stuck' at critical developmental stages which leaves gaps in their development.

These gaps 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.

The key thing to remember is that it is never too late to build a secure attachment. A secure attachment is critical to emotional stability, relationship building and learning. So, the time a parent invests in building an attachment (with bottom-up rewiring) is like watering a plant. It is essential for growth and development and is likely

## Iain's story

"The parenting style we used successfully with our birth child was just not working with our adoptive son. His behaviour was "stuck". We went on Adoption UK's Parenting Our Children training and gained valuable insight into therapeutic parenting. We changed the way we parent to suit our son's development and the improvement in his behaviour is massive."

to pay greater dividends in the long run than academic hot housing. In fact it is so important to put family first that some parents keep their children home from school for several weeks after placement, while others arrange for struggling children to attend school on a reduced timetable (see starting school, page 29 and attendance and absences, page 38).

## Think toddler

A good rule of thumb when parenting or teaching a child with attachment difficulties is to "think toddler". In other words, actions that you would accept as normal in a much younger child may be linked to attachment, trauma and loss in school age children.

You may notice other gaps. "Babyish" behaviours can become more pronounced in periods of stress when we all naturally revert to earlier patterns of behaviour and more primitive survival responses, but less obvious gaps can persist unnoticed throughout childhood and adolescence.

## Common developmental gaps include:

- Having the emotional control and concentration levels of a toddler (see Executive functions page 10)
- Sense of permanency of an infant (see pages 12)
- Unable to wait for reward or attention (see Delayed gratification, page 23)
- Controlling behaviour (see page 24)
- Not able to regulate stress and stimulation (Toxic stress, pages 17 & 18)
- Unable to play nicely or socialise well (see Friendships, page 34)
- Sensory issues and difficulties with motor skills (see page 19)
- Being excessively clingy or overly independent
- Having the overwhelming shame of a toddler (see pages 20-21).

## Executive functions

**“Our children are doing the best they can. The neurobiological impact of trauma means that rather than ‘won’t do’, they simply ‘can’t do’ much of what is asked of them at home and at school.”**

Christine Gordon, Co-Author of *New Families, Old Scripts*

**E**xecutive 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 control impulses and regulate feelings. While many children navigate school with a basic set of ‘school skills’ that enable them to follow rules, learn right from wrong, understand what comes next, see other people’s points of view, predict outcomes and know that a hidden object (be it a pencil or Mum) is still there even when they cannot see it, our children may be lucky to develop these skills by the time they leave.

Essentially, executive functions are like a manager that controls and organises the brain. It is good to keep this analogy in mind when thinking about how bright children often struggle at school.

Executive functions develop from infancy through to adulthood, enjoying a burst of activity in adolescence. How well these skills develop depends on a child’s environment. Our children will likely have experienced angry and abusive parents who exposed them to an over-stimulating environment and/or neglectful parents who created an under-stimulated one.

Neither of these environments provide the stability and predictability needed to develop emotional regulation and good executive functioning. Consequently, our children struggle to process new

experiences and may remain ‘stuck’ in repeating patterns of behaviour that served a purpose in their traumatic past but are no longer useful to them.

### When completing even simple exercises executive functions help us to:

1. **Think about what we want to achieve**
2. **Make a plan**
3. **Carry out the plan**
4. **Evaluate the job.**

A child may have plenty of ability and try his best, but if he cannot make a plan, carry it out and evaluate the results, he will rarely achieve his goals. Also, executive failures at any stage of this sequence can lead to aggressive outbursts. Teaching the “goal, obstacle, plan, do review” approach can keep children on track.

**“Supporting an adopted child’s EF skills in class supports all children. Teachers need to realise that all children are still developing their EF skills, so all children will benefit from supportive strategies.”**

Marion Allen, Education Consultant, Family Futures

***When Canadian psychiatrist, Dr. Adele Diamond, studied self-regulation and problem solving in four-year-olds, she found that even at this early stage self-regulation skills were a more reliable predictor of academic success than IQ.***

***(Diamond 2007).***

## How to help children develop their EF skills

- Set one task at a time and demonstrate, "here's one I did earlier"
- Plan routines and use visual and verbal prompts
- Chunk information to improve learning and recall
- Play memory games
- Break down tasks into simple steps (see checklist below)
- Goal, obstacle, plan, do, review
- Provide the right materials
- Give a stress ball to help concentration
- Plan and structure times of change.



**Visual planners** help a child to structure their day or part of their day at home or at school. You can adapt these according to a child's age and ability, perhaps using one for the morning, one in school and one for homework. Ask the class teacher to place a plan for each day on the child's desk. You can use wipe clean laminate cards for this or download free printable resources from [www.visualaidsforlearning.com](http://www.visualaidsforlearning.com)

### Alex's room tidying checklist

- Put dirty clothes in wash basket ✓
- Put all rubbish in waste

### Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function™ (BRIEF™)

by Gerard A. Gioia, Ph.D., Peter K. Isquith, Ph.D., Steven C. Guy, Ph.D., and Lauren Kenworthy, Ph.D. is one psychological assessment to ask for if you want your child's EF to be assessed.

## My morning routine



- I get up ✓
- I wash my face and brush my teeth



- I get dressed
- I eat my breakfast



- I put on my shoes and coat



- I pick up my school bag
- We drive to school

[www.projectlearnnet.org](http://www.projectlearnnet.org), a site dedicated to working with children with acquired brain injury, is a great resource for learning about and teaching EF skills.

### "Goal, Obstacle, Plan, Do, Review"

**Model and teach this approach to planning a task:**

**Goal** (what do you want to achieve? What will it look like when finished?)

**Obstacle** (what is getting in the way of you achieving your goal?)

**Plan** (how will you do that? Need help?)

**Do** (work on the task)

**Review** (how did it go? what worked? what didn't? How might you improve it?)

# Permanence

## and the Parenting attitude



**Never withdraw family fun time as a consequence of bad behaviour.**

a safe base. This is why adoption can make such a difference to children even when their early years have been traumatic.

We can further enhance the benefits of permanency by developing a parenting attitude that recreates the “good enough” mother baby relationship that our children missed out on, or did not get enough of, in infancy. Attachment psychologist, Dan Hughes sums up this attitude with the acronym PLACE, where PLACE means being playful, loving, accepting, curious and empathic. This attitude alone can rewire how children see and understand themselves, other people and the world. It effectively repairs the attachment relationship - and it is the relationship, not positive reinforcement - that produces lasting change for our children. But it is not a quick fix. It is important to maintain the attitude as much as possible, especially when your child’s behaviour is challenging. Use it as your main strategy and to underpin all other strategies you employ.

**The PLACE attitude effectively repairs the attachment relationship and produces lasting change for our children.**

**H**aving a forever home in which you are cherished as a permanent family member is wonderfully healing for a child who has had a difficult start in life. The stability of adoption lets children begin to rediscover life from the position of

**Share the PLACE attitude with your child’s teacher and classroom assistant to help reduce your child’s stress at school.**

## The PLACE attitude

**PLAYFUL:** Playfulness and positive experiences allow a child to develop feelings of self-worth. Being playful could mean ruffling the child's hair when walking past, playing games after school, or giving her a quick, spontaneous hug. A relaxed and playful environment has a greater influence on a child's behaviour than rewards, sanctions or anger-based discipline. Playfulness engages and rewires children at the brainstem and limbic levels and recognises their limited ability to follow instructions. Timetable lots of fun into your family routine. Never withdraw family fun time as a consequence of bad behaviour.

Simply delighting in your child conveys playful acceptance of her regardless of her achievements or misdemeanours. Soft eye contact and facial expressions, good touch and welcoming body posture communicate positivity, as does maintaining a "smiling" home environment.

**LOVING:** Show your child that you love her at all times, even when she misbehaves. Try not to get angry when the child misbehaves. Don't reject her even if she rejects you, and reconnect with her quickly after absences or disciplining. Find something valuable about your child and find ways to love that part of her when her behaviour is at its most challenging. One way to increase your empathy in the tough times is to picture your child as the tiny frightened tot she was before coming

to you and remind yourself that it is this part of her that is frightened and fighting.

**ACCEPTING:** Showing acceptance of the child and the reasons behind her difficulties, even if you don't accept her behaviour, can help the child stay regulated and enable her to change her responses. Understanding that your child is doing the best she can and remembering that behaviours are a way of communicating needs and fears can help you develop an accepting attitude. You can use accepting expressions like, 'I love you very much and still it's not okay for you to hit me. Let's see if we can find a better way for you to show me what you need.'

**CURIOUS:** Being curious rather than angry about behaviours can encourage change. You can show curiosity by wondering out loud about the unacceptable behaviour. Curiosity can help a child to stop, think and make sense of her feelings and behaviours, and usually works better than asking direct questions. A child who has 'switched off' her feelings may not know why she's upset. She may say something trivial, or withhold

the information through lack of trust. An educated guess such as, 'I wonder if you are worried about the school trip on Friday,' can open discussion, in which you can listen empathically.

**EMPATHY** is the most important quality adopters can have. To understand the child's needs we have to put ourselves in their shoes and show them that we 'get it'. For example, 'I know that these spellings are hard for you to remember', 'Your eye is really red, I bet that hurts.' Empathy allows the child to feel her feelings and encourages the release of grief, fear and rage behind emotional and behavioural problems. Try to empathise with your child before disciplining and throughout any disciplinary measures (eg, consequences). It is vital to remain genuinely empathic, not flippant or sarcastic.

Empathy increases when you move from thinking, "What has my child done to me?" to "What is my child trying to say to me?" Your child's behaviour is a means of communicating their distress. While it might be directed at you, it is not about you.

### Our children need parents to:

- help them feel safe
- communicate PLACE, verbally and non-verbally
- help them regulate big feelings like fear, shame, anger and sadness
- help them feel like a good person even when they behave badly
- show that our relationship is strong even when things are tough
- help them make sense of their life story
- help them understand our point of view and motives towards them
- stay with them and remain strong when they are upset



## Self care

**You will need support from trusted others to comfort and teach your child. You will make mistakes. Learn from them, and continue. Your own attachment histories will be awakened as you raise your child. You will have to address anything from your past that has not been resolved in order to persist in your difficult parenting.**

Dan Hughes, Attachment Therapist

**F**licking through this booklet it may look like parenting or teaching an adopted child is relentless and demanding. It is true that just a few months of neglect and/or abuse can mean years of intensive repair for our children. The reality, though, is that parents and teachers don't need to be perfect - just good enough for long enough to help our children feel valued and give them a sense of belonging. Part of being "good enough" means having a playful, liking or loving, accepting, curious and empathic attitude most of the time.

However, we can only do this when we feel calm and regulated. To maintain a healthy attitude, we need to ask for and accept support, and take care of our own needs as attentively as we care for our children.

**"There is an Indian proverb which says that everyone is a house with four rooms – a physical, a mental, an emotional, a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time, but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person."** Rumer Godden

We all have needs, issues and histories which impact on how we interact with others. How we were parented influences how we parent,

our experiences at school affect how we feel about our children's schooling, and of course we all have our own attachment styles with anxious, avoidant, angry or enmeshed elements that can be triggered by stress.

It is tempting to assume that relationship difficulties with our children are caused by the children's issues, but what matters more is the dynamic of our relationship with them. We have more ability to control our responses than our children do, so it is our job to do so. Finding out about adult attachment styles can help us understand our own relationship needs and responsibilities, while valuing ourselves teaches our children the importance of self care.

### Blocked care syndrome

Parenting (or teaching) a traumatised child can mean giving a lot but getting little back, so we often defend ourselves by shutting down emotionally.

You may notice under stress how you go through the motions of caring – feeding, supervising, teaching, but without joy it's a chore! If we get blocked like this we need to reduce our stress levels by looking after our own needs, taking time out, having hobbies and seeking the support of somebody who listens to us with PLACE.

Self care helps us delight in our children and lets them experience us the way a baby experiences his doting parents, through smiles, soft eye contact, playfulness, and the "I love you because you are worth it" messages in non-verbal face and body signals. It literally changes their brain.



# Permanency and constancy

**“For as long as you remember me, I am never entirely lost.”**

Frederick Buechner



**T**he term permanency is used to describe a child's ability to know that objects and people continue to exist even when they cannot see, hear, smell or touch them. Permanency creates a sense of safety and helping a traumatised child to feel safe is the most important thing we can do for them.

Throughout infancy children need many repetitions of things and people going away and returning repeatedly in order to grasp the concept of permanency. In healthy homes this happens all the time. For example, a baby drops a rattle and someone gives it back to him; mum goes out of the room and soon returns, parents play peek-a-boo and hide and seek; and families have loving, multisensory goodbyes and big hellos.

Thousands of repetitions of these actions with an attachment figure enable a child to complete the critical

developmental stage of permanency, which creates a feeling of safety. So, by the time securely attached children start school, they can tolerate being separated from family for a few hours without feeling like they will never see them again. Adopted children who didn't have enough of this type of healthy interaction are likely to feel frightened and abandoned when separated from their primary carer, need almost constant attention from others, and be unable to soothe and regulate themselves.

**Because they feel like they have been forgotten, children with a poor sense of permanency can become fearful and panicky and behave in a way that appears attention seeking, disruptive, manipulative, or irritating.**

## Constancy

Constancy is a developmental stage linked to permanency. Constancy gives children stability and resilience and helps them see themselves and others as people of many parts. So, for example, if they misbehave they know that they have done something wrong, but they are not a bad person. Likewise, they can see a parent or

teacher's anger as a response to a particular event, not because you hate them.

Our children have poor constancy but we can help improve it in a couple of ways:

**1** Correct misdemeanours by being firm but pleasant. Tell the child the rule. E.g., “you know it's not okay to take things without asking...” and remind them of the consequence. Do this

without anger so that the limbic part of the child's brain gets the message that he is safe even though you are not happy with what he has done. Remember, think toddler!

**2** Use what Holly van Gulden, co-author of *Real Parents, Real Children*, calls the language of parts, so the child learns that we are all capable of using different parts – angry part, sad part,

chocolate-loving part – and yet be one person. Talk about the child, yourself and others using parts language, e.g., “my sleepy part didn't hear the alarm”, “Your hungry part wanted the chocolate cake”. Name more positive parts than negative ones, use the language when you are in a good mood as well as bad, and have silly parts as well as serious ones.

# 3 great ways to build permanency



**1** Play peekaboo and hide and seek. Holly van Gulden recommends parents play hide and seek with their children every day. Even 10 minutes a day before or after school makes a difference.

**2** Use sensory reminders. A spray of mum's perfume or dad's aftershave on a child's sleeve,

a family photo in a key ring, loving notes in a lunchbox or pencil case, or a phone call from home at break time can all give a child a sensory connection with his safe base.

**3** Model being held in mind.

Our children need to feel us thinking about them. Keep a photo of your child on or near you and tell them, "I keep your photo with me when you are at school, so I can see you in the picture and hold you here (tap over your heart) and here (tap your head), until we are together again". This shows the child that they are important to you and models how they can hold you in mind, too. Teachers can do this too with children who constantly demand attention in school.

Hugs and  
kisses  
from  
xxxxxxx



# Toxic stress and anxiety

“A child with a trauma history only has to get the ‘slightest whiff of stress’ to put them into a state of alarm. I have seen this even in children adopted as babies – they are simply born stressed! In a busy school environment it is essential that we keep these children regulated and feeling safe.”

Mary Roulston, head teacher

**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 a motivating chemical called adrenalin, but when stress is prolonged or chronic, cortisol takes over.

## Some things we know about cortisol

- It stays in the body much longer than adrenalin and knocks out calming and happy hormones such as serotonin and oxytocin.
- It affects memory.
- Too much cortisol in infancy can over-activate the stress response, so even minor problems cause children to behave as if they are under serious threat.
- High levels of cortisol in the early years can cause sensory integration problems (see sensory issues, page 19).
- Traumatised children can develop anticipatory stress - they expect bad things to happen so their cortisol levels are spiky.
- Highly stressed children have difficulty controlling their impulses.



## Caregiver as regulator

Babies cannot regulate themselves, they need a caring adult to co-regulate their distress and model how to stay calm and alert. The caregiver does this by being available, calm, soothing and responsive, so that the child's body rhythms match those of the carer. Children who did not have this quality of care in infancy often develop strange or immature ways of self

soothing such as biting, head banging, rocking, scratching, chewing and cutting. They may keep turning around, call out, hide, fidget, ask questions, chat constantly, and there may be other behaviours, which increase under stress. Some children manage to hold it together at school and off load their stress when they get home. Although cortisol levels can stabilise when children settle



into loving families, the stress of school and the absence of parents can mean children who are calm at home are anxious and fearful at school.

Stress can make children fidgety in class. Telling them to stop fidgeting rarely works, as stopping is not within their conscious control, but a stress

ball provides a physical release that can help children relax and focus. Encourage teachers to see a stress ball not as a distraction but as a way to concentrate.

## Ways to reduce stress

- Surprises are stressful, even when they are fun. New situations, people and places activate the stress response, so plan carefully for change and challenge (*see times of change, page 35*).
- Reduce anxiety about what's coming next by talking about it and providing a visual timetable. Some parents put a daily planner on their child's bedroom wall. At school the teacher can tape a class timetable to the child's desk.
- Predictable, consistent, repetitive, familiar, nurturing experiences reduce stress levels at home and at school.
- Give this or that choices and accept that either choice is OK.
- Encourage teachers to wonder out loud about what might be provoking challenging behaviour and respond with empathy.
- Provide a "safe space" or "calm spot" filled with sensory activities to which the child can go with a trusted adult when they feel anxious, or dysregulated. (this must not be regarded as punishment).

**Children need to be calm and alert in order to absorb new information. Imagine how hard it must be to learn when trying to manage high stress with the regulation skills of a toddler.**

- Where possible, identify stressors and try to keep them to a minimum.
- Consequence bad behaviour quickly and without anger, threat, loss or separation (*see discipline page 24*)

***The analogy of the stress bucket is useful. If you think of having a bucket, into which you dump your stress throughout the day, most of us will finish the day with a half full bucket. Our children can wake up with an already full stress bucket so that even tiny drops of stress throughout the day can cause an overspill.***



## Teach children sensory activities that can calm them down quickly

- Sit under a heavy blanket
- Press their hands down on their head
- Hug their knees to their chest
- Rock slowly
- Smell lavender or camomile oil
- Snuggle into a small space
- Suck a sweet
- Suck yoghurt/thick milkshake through a straw
- Get a big hug.

## Routine calming activities

- Walk home from school (with backpack on)
- Do physical tasks or jobs throughout the day
- Have a chill-out time before homework.
- Swim, cycle

**Children often find enclosed spaces calming. A pop-up tent, cushions, or a blanket draped over a table can be a safe space.**



# Sensory issues

**“Sensory integration sorts, orders and eventually puts all of the individual sensory inputs together into a whole brain function.”**

Dr A. Jean Ayers, pioneer in sensory integration dysfunction

**E**veryone 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. Some children may get diagnosed with sensory processing difficulties, others may just get labelled as badly behaved. Symptoms vary depending on which senses are affected, but many children indulge in sensory or thrill-seeking behaviour and over react to, or avoid, certain tastes, smells and touch. They may also have executive function difficulties such as problem solving and may have difficulty maintaining friendships.

Sensory difficulties can arise from within the child, for example, having to sit for a long time on a hard chair can

## Be mindful of trauma

**Occupational therapists may recommend a sensory diet of activities for a child with sensory issues and/or behavioural problems. As with all interventions it is critical to know the child and her trauma history as certain sensory experiences can trigger past trauma.**

## Bad boy no more!

My son Jimmy has successfully finished Primary 1, but in nursery he would knock down children and plough through anything they had built with no sense of remorse; he'd jump off things, go too fast and indulge in risk-taking behaviour. He couldn't sit at peace at story time and would try to trip up other children. He was generally known as “the bad boy”.

At a sensory assessment the OT said he needed dedicated help in school. We fought for an additional support needs assessment which resulted in the allocation of a full-time classroom assistant, who is wonderful with him. She does joint, back and chest compressions to calm him down and jumping and crab walks before going into class. He has a special cushion to allow him to move while sitting on a chair or on the mat, and blue tack to fiddle with in class. His concentration has improved and there was only one accident in Primary 1, for which he was sorry afterwards. His friend said, “Jimmy used to be a bad boy in nursery but he's a good boy now.”

make a child fidget or get out of their seat. Challenges can also arise from the external environment, for example, it can be hard to concentrate in a busy classroom and a child may focus on something outside the window in an effort to deal with the sensory overload in the room. Consequently, she cannot feel calm, pay attention or do her work.



## Getting help

If you suspect your child has sensory processing difficulties, ask your GP to refer her to a paediatric occupational therapist who has a background in sensory processing.

*Making Sense of Sensory Behaviour A Practical Approach at Home for Parents and Carers*, is an excellent downloadable booklet full of tips, produced by Occupational Therapists in the Children with Disabilities team at Falkirk Council. [www.falkirk.gov.uk](http://www.falkirk.gov.uk)

To find out more about occupational therapy and to find a private OT contact the British Association of OT and College of Occupational Therapists [www.cot.co.uk](http://www.cot.co.uk)

# Shame and self-esteem

Sometimes the child will show how bad he feels, at other times he may hide his shame by acting like “Superkid”.

**T**raumatised children tend to have a deep and powerful sense of shame. This is not the same as guilt. Guilt occurs when you feel you have made a mistake; shame occurs when you feel you are a mistake. Many adopted children believe they are bad and their ‘bad’ behaviours are often their unsuccessful attempts to regulate frightening or shame-based memories, feelings, experiences and beliefs about themselves. Demanding that children stop shame-based behaviours may make it harder to parent and teach them because it can actually increase their shame.

or a crayon-covered wall), expecting to see a delighted parent but instead sees a horrified one, and he gets upset as he feels that Mum or Dad don’t love him. This is shame. It is a painful state, which makes a child want to hide and causes changes in stress and nervous system responses.

How long a child stays in shame determines how toxic it becomes. A caring parent quickly comforts the child, repairs the attachment relationship and regulates the shame response. These short bursts of shame within a caring relationship teach the child acceptable behaviour without him feeling like a bad person.

### Three big challenges for parents and teachers

1. How to build a child’s self esteem when they feel bad about who they are
2. How to discipline a child without increasing their shame
3. How to create success when they expect failure.

### How shame becomes toxic

Shame is an attachment and socialising emotion. It kicks in when a child starts to walk and his caregiver tries to keep him safe as he explores his surroundings. An excited infant shows Mum or Dad his new discovery (perhaps a bread knife

### Anger, control, fear of failure

However, if the parent ridicules, humiliates or rejects the child, the child is left with unrelieved painful feelings that develop into a sense of feeling bad, not about what he has done, but about who he is. On top of this an abused child may feel that he was abused because he was bad and deserved it. This feeling of being “not good enough” creates anger and controlling, impulsive behaviour, which can be triggered by a disapproving look or tone of voice. In older children it may be internalised so that the child thinks he is disgusting and gets upset when he makes any kind of mistake at all. You may see this in your child when they get things wrong or in their anger, control or reluctance to try something new, just in case they get it wrong. It also shows up in lying or blaming others to cover their mistakes. Sometimes the child will show how bad he feels, at other times he may hide his shame by acting like “Superkid”.

# Creating self-esteem out of shame

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

Maya Angelou



**B**ecause we love and value our children we want them to love and value themselves. So, when they say things like, “I’m stupid”, “I always make mistakes”, “Nobody likes me”, “I hate my sister”, or simply, “I’m bad”, we tend to deny it by saying, “Of course you’re not bad, you just made a mistake”, or “Don’t say that about your sister, you’re just annoyed”. But trying to convince a child that he is really good when he feels he is not, may make him mistrust your judgement and force him to try harder to prove you wrong. He may feel even more alone and reluctant to tell you anything because you “just don’t get him”. Not getting him undermines your attachment and encourages a child to suppress their feelings.

We can help children to overcome their shame by meeting it with empathy about how they feel and curiosity about why they feel that way (See *The Parenting Attitude*, page 12). This allows us to share in the child’s inner life and help them to change.

## **Joy is the opposite of shame.**

Building lots of genuine good fun into family life, especially when times are tough can reduce shame. Do something fun together every day so your child gets the message that you like being with him because he’s a great child, not because it’s your job.

Dan Hughes recommends maintaining a smiling home (and school). The idea is to create an atmosphere where life feels half full rather than half empty, where you focus on the positives e.g. “Listen to you! You really know how to show me you’re angry,” and where your interactions are playful and accepting of the child, warts and all.



Shame makes people close up and withdraw, so when your child is open and trusting enough to tell you, “I’m no good”, grab the opportunity to empathise with how hard it must be to feel like that. E.g. “I’m sorry you feel that you are no good. It must be so hard to carry that feeling around with you.” You can go on to say that you see him as a good person who struggles with a lot of hard stuff and you’d like to help him with that. But first acknowledge his view of himself, as this is what underpins his behaviour and colours his world.

# Praise, reward and success

Keep challenges small and praise specific. Confidence and pleasure come from success. Everyone needs to succeed at something.

Well done!  
x

**A**ffirming a child for who she is, matters more than rewarding her for what she does. Relationship, not reinforcement, changes a child.

Praise and reward are the foundation of how most parents and teachers manage children's behaviour. This may work for securely attached children with good impulse control and a healthy sense of self, but it rarely does for adopted children. Our children need to feel like they are good enough, even when they make

mistakes; rewarding them only when they get things right may mean they get few of the feel-good moments that build success – and they need loads!

They also need unconditional love and acceptance so rewarding them when they do what they are told may teach them that they are only valued when they do what other people want.

Also, if you think about the stress response, a child may desperately want a sticker on his chart, but his stress bucket is full and the part of his brain that manages impulses and concentration does not work well. Wanting rewards and failing to get them even when you try really hard, compounds shame and could make you want to stop trying altogether.

## Five ways to praise better

Children who believe they are bad can feel uncomfortable when you tell them they are good. You may find when you praise your child for getting spellings right, they start getting them wrong, they tear up a piece of work you checked, or say that it was just a fluke they got it right. This is because the praise doesn't fit with their view of themselves. There are several ways to praise more successfully:

- **Keep it brief.** Say it with a smile or affirming touch so the child feels the praise, then move on quickly so it isn't too much. Eg, "That's lovely writing, Jack. Now let's see how well you can do your picture."
- **Praise the task not the person.** So, it's "nice tidy sink", "great bit of writing", "lovely clean face", rather than, "good boy" or "good girl".
- **Praise effort not achievement.** Remember traumatised children often can't do, rather than won't do, so we need to acknowledge that the task was, "a big ask. I'm proud of you for trying it. We'll just keep practising."
- **Ham it up.** Some children need lots of playful pizzazz in order to feel praise. For them doing a victory dance or chanting, "We are great" loud and soft, fast and slow, while holding hands can work.
- **Affirm the child at all times** even when they don't finish the task or do what they're told. Empathise with something like, "it's a shame you couldn't do... let's have a hug and we'll try again later."

## Practice creates success

Children with attachment issues may expect to fail at most tasks, so we need to create opportunities for them to succeed at managing everyday activities appropriate to their developmental level.

If Sue cannot sit beside someone for 10 minutes without pinching or poking them, say, "We're going to practise sitting nicely for five minutes" (or whatever she can manage). Stay with her and praise her for doing a great job. When she succeeds, try for longer. Often our children can't learn from their mistakes, so we need to reduce their chance of failing by giving them achievable goals.

It's good to use the word 'practising' with children who struggle. Practising is about learning to do things well, not about success or failure and we all need to practise.

# Reward and learning to wait

Hug token

**W**hen you get what you need consistently as a baby you learn to trust that you will continue to get what you need and so you can wait for food, attention, toy or other reward without getting stressed or feeling forgotten. This skill is called delayed gratification. It is a skill we all need in order to succeed – think of studying for an exam or saving for a car. Because of their histories many of our children have a problem waiting for rewards and stopping their impulses. This is a deficit in brain functioning that behavioural management systems like star charts need to take into account.

Think about what a baby needs and remember that we want to fill the gaps that were missed when rebuilding the brain from the bottom up.

- Our children may need lots of short frequent check-ins from parents and teachers before they can learn to wait for attention.
- They often need instant rewards to build the connections in the brain that allow them to wait, and short-term goals to help achieve long-term goals.

If a child in school cannot behave well until lunch-time it is pointless asking him to aim for a sticker at the end of the day, or week! Much better to reward him at break time with specific

praise, a smaller star or a hug token to take home to Mum or Dad.

- Keep challenges small and praise specific. Confidence, pleasure and self-esteem come from success.
- Everyone needs to succeed at something. Find things a child enjoys and use those to build self-esteem – learning to swim, riding a bike or other out-of-school achievements can all develop skills needed to achieve at school.

The famous “marshmallow test” by Walter Mischel showed that four-year-olds who could resist eating sweets in order to get a bigger treat later developed into adolescents who did better at school and managed frustration and stress well.

Other children who had been able to wait only one minute before eating the sweets were taught simple mental tricks - such as pretending that the sweets were only a framed picture - to help them to wait 15 minutes. But the real challenge is to create good habits that encourage children to wait in small ways every day and to reward them with PLACE while waiting. Simple habits such as no sweets before dinner, earning pocket money, or waiting until the big day to open presents all teach the brain to outsmart temptation.





# Reward and control

**S**ome children who feel unsafe or mistrust adults' intentions attempt to control their environment by whatever means they can. For these children rewards, bribery, threats and punishments won't work. No punishment is greater than what they have lived through and no reward outweighs the instinct to keep yourself safe at any cost.

Controlling behaviour is hard to live with, but it is a strength – controlling children are often more able to stand up to peer pressure than compliant children. Tell your child how much you admire their strength and determination. Use PLACE to help them feel safe and give a clear this or that choice (without anger). Some choice gives back some control –

*Well done!*

too much choice is stressful. Congratulate the child on making a choice, whether or not you believe it was the best one.

# Shame and discipline

**“Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse? Think of the last time you felt humiliated or treated unfairly. Did you feel like cooperating or doing better?”**

Dr Jane Nelsen, Educational Psychologist

**T**raumatised children often experience discipline as being harsh or abusive. The easiest way to change this perception is to:

- not get angry with them
- help them understand why they are being disciplined.

The 'why' must always affirm your relationship and increase the child's self-worth. Hence something like, "Because you are important to me and I want to help you pass your test" is better than "If you fail this test, there'll be no trip on Saturday!"

Parents and teachers need to embrace the power of empathy when disciplining traumatised children. Think about how the child feels. What could be going on for them that would make it difficult for them to do what you ask? Convey to the child that you get it that some part of what you are asking them to do is hard for them and you are happy to help.

When thinking about discipline, make a clear difference between behaviours, which are okay to criticise, and the child's thoughts, feelings and intentions, which are not up for judgment.

Helping a child to regulate the feelings behind their behaviours, and to understand where those feelings come from, is more effective than trying to stamp out behaviour. At the same time address the behaviour with better supervision and/or consequences, both of which are best done with PLACE, not anger, rejection, or other shame-inducing approaches such as sarcasm or humiliation. Staying accepting, and empathic when children misbehave helps them feel safe, repairs the relationship and minimises shame.

After all, the purpose of discipline is not to punish but to socialise children by building cause and effect thinking and replacing shame about self with guilt about actions.

**Empathy, not anger, is the key to effective discipline**

**Bottom line:** Avoid discipline that involves separation, rejection, anger or fear. Your relationship not reinforcement heals the child. Repair it quickly after disciplining.



**Connect to correct – When disciplining ask, “Will what I am about to do strengthen or weaken my connection with this child?”**

## Some positive ways to discipline

**Give win/win, this or that choices.** Don't ask, 'will you ....?', do you want to...? what time would you like to...?, just think of two options that you are happy with and offer them as a choice, so whatever the child chooses you get a positive outcome. For example, you want a child to do homework, she wants to go out to play. A win/win choice would be, “you can go out to play now for 20 minutes and come back to do homework, or do homework now and go out to play until teatime”. Amazingly, children usually take one option. If she complains, just empathise and repeat the choice. Whatever she chooses let her know it's okay.

**Employ natural and logical consequences.** Consequences differ from punishment in that they are proportionate, reasonable and enforceable measures used to build good cause and effect thinking skills. They can be natural, eg. go out in the rain without a coat and you get wet, or logical, eg. you spill the milk, you clean it up. Logical consequences are either pay-backs or withdrawal of privileges.

Consequences must only be given when the child and adult are both calm, perhaps after or during time in. Angry adults can trigger even worse behaviour and reduce the learning experience as the child shifts her focus from what she has done wrong to what the adult is doing wrong, which reinforces her view of adults as angry and abusive.

Because it's hard to come up with an appropriate consequence on the spot, it can help to write down 10-20 in advance on index cards or a notebook.

**60-second scolding.** We all lose our temper sometimes – we're only human! In fact a quick burst of anger is often preferable to a long sulk or sarcasm. The secret is to keep it brief, preferably less than a minute and then quickly begin a much longer period of positive repair.

## No sarcasm!

Sometimes when we try to hide our anger it comes out as sarcasm, which makes children anxious and stops them trusting us. Think of a simple phrase like, “Sure, you just watch TV and the homework will do itself!” If you are a child who struggles to know what is right, does that mean you continue watching TV, or stop watching TV?

Parents and teachers who are clear and honest in their communication make a huge difference to a child's sense of safety and success.

# Structure and supervision

Give children the message that supervision is a gift not a punishment

**T**he best discipline for a traumatised child is to reduce her risk of getting into trouble by providing the structure and supervision that you would give to a toddler. It is hard, but necessary.

- **Structure (routine, repetition, rituals, limited choice)** – Parents and teachers can structure a child's day and reduce her stress by making choices for her or limiting her choices to this or that. Introducing frequent breaks into the timetable gives the brain time to process new experiences. Repeat rules and routines many times, only relaxing them when she is completely comfortable. Tighten the structure again if there is any change to the routine (see *Times of change*, page 35) Be predictable by always accepting and validating a child's thoughts, feelings and behaviours, but surprising you with the consequences you provide. **Never withdraw your affection as a punishment and re-connect quickly after any discipline, like you would do with a toddler.**

- **Supervision** – Adults who keep a close eye on things can create opportunities for success and reduce

## A big part of supervision is time in.

Time in with a misbehaving child works so much better than time out. It reinforces the attachment relationship and shows a child that you like her, even when you dislike her behaviour. (Time out does the opposite). Your presence and your PLACE attitude is an effective discipline and a regulating influence on the child. Tell the child that you believe she needs to stay with you while she's upset and you will take care of her. When she is calm, she can help you with a job, either to clear up her own mess, or do some other safe task. Tell her you will help her with any part that is difficult. Be directive and firm but also attuned to your child and empathic about her difficulties. Keep practising. It may feel odd to begin with, but it gets easier with practice.



## Exceptions to time in and time out

- Time in will only work if you are calm so take a few deep breaths to regulate yourself or take a time out for yourself.
- Some children self-select time out as a way of calming themselves, which is fine as it is not imposed upon them. Simply reconnect when they are calm.
- Schools may insist on giving time outs. It is important to tell staff that a traumatised child needs to be given a time out in a safe space, where they can see or hear the teacher. Alternatively, they can be sent to a teacher with whom they feel safe (preferably the same teacher every time). They should never be left alone in a corridor or shamed in front of the class as the behaviour teachers are trying to eliminate will only get worse.

the risk of failure, thereby minimising the child's shame and emotional outbursts. Supervision means staying with a child as if she were a toddler, structuring and child-proofing her environment, engaging with her frequently in a playful way and helping her to manage her feelings.

It's important to give a child the message that supervision is a gift not a punishment. A learning support assistant is often beneficial because close supervision alone can make a huge difference to success in school.

**“Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.”**

Brene Brown, PhD professor of social work

# Trauma triggers and the alarm response

**“We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”**

Anais Nin

**T**raumatised children tend to have a ‘sensitised’ alarm response, which over-reacts to all kinds of verbal, non-verbal and sensory triggers that other children ignore - the sound of a door banging, the look on a teacher’s face or tone of voice, certain smells, and sensations such as hunger, rejection or shame. So seemingly minor threats can cause dramatic changes in behaviour.

Different children respond differently under threat; all tend to regress, some get hyped up, and others switch off or shut down many do a bit of both. Teachers and parents can misinterpret a frightened child’s response as wilful and controlling and may respond to what looks like defiance by becoming angry and more demanding. The frightened child reads the adult’s body language as threatening and moves from alarm to fear to terror. The smoke alarm in her brain reacts as if ‘the bad stuff’ is happening all over again and primes her to fight, flight or freeze. If there is no physical release for the adrenaline she can be left feeling irritable and restless for a long time. When she realises she over-reacted and there was no real danger she can go into shame.



## Three things to prevent meltdowns

**1 Get to know the signs and help the child feel safe.** You can help a child recognise signs like, “I notice you chew your sleeves/pull on your jumper/bite your hand, etc, when you are getting really stressed”. Agree with the child and school that this is the time to use a calming strategy such as belly breathing, go to their safe place, have a brain break, or do a job with the classroom assistant as physical activity can release the adrenaline. These early warning signs occur when all areas of the brain are working and the child can still be engaged. This is the time to prevent a meltdown, if you can.

**2 Teach impulse control.** Traumatized children often think they are stupid, bad, or not right in the head. They need to know that alarm reactions are normal responses to trauma and they can work on them. Encourage the child to recognise the feelings in their body rather than focusing on emotions, which are harder to define. Adrenaline causes physical sensations like feeling hot, tight chest or fizzy tummy. Simply focusing on sensations starts to change them. Then take a couple of deep breaths or count to 10, which creates a gap between impulse and action. Teach them to fill the gap with thoughts about how much mum or dad love them and want them to do well. Now they can choose what to do.

**3 Help school staff understand how traumatised children think, feel and behave.** Understanding reduces adults’ confusion, frustration and anger which means more helpful interactions with the child. Teach school staff about number one on this list, give out the teacher information sheets and ask them to consider the classroom tips below.



When stress responses flood the brain stem and mid-brain a child cannot easily engage the thinking part of the brain. So she could sit in a classroom in a state of anxiety and learn nothing. In a state of alarm, she cannot respond to instructions, assurances or threats.

Triggers could be anything in the child's sensory environment – It is impossible to know all or even any of them, but there are things you can do when a child looks like she is becoming dysregulated.

## Classroom tips

**Have a key adult stay with the child when they are in a state of alarm.** The child is unlikely to be able to respond to reasonable demands, but the presence of a key adult is regulating. The adult can reassure the child, "you are safe here with me". If a child is under a table, recognise that he must feel safe there and acknowledge, "I can see that this feels like a safe place to be right now. I'll just stay

with you to make sure you are okay." This is much more effective than attempting to threaten, bribe or coax her out. Afterwards, help her reflect on what felt safe about that space and encourage her to build that safe place in her mind next time she gets scared.

## Orientate to the environment.

A big issue with trauma is staying in the present. Taking notice of little things in the environment helps the child return to the here and now. The supervising adult could ask the child to notice things about her appearance and the room around them. When the child feels safe enough the adult could take her around the class to check that everything is in its proper place.

**Safe space.** It is important to have a safe space in the classroom to which the child can go when she needs a time out for any reason (see the school environment, page 31)

**Circle of safety.** A frightened child may feel safer if she can draw a boundary around herself with chalk when she is in the playground or somewhere else where she cannot get to her safe space. The idea is that nobody crosses the boundary until the child is ready to move.

**Attune to the child's energy, vitality and rhythm.** We know that children feel heard and understood when we match the intensity of their feelings, which is why we do it with babies instinctively. The idea is not to match the child's anger or fear. Instead match the intensity with which they express those feelings while substituting wonder, acceptance and empathy for their anger, and using movements, volume and energy similar to the child's. Most adults make the mistake of speaking very softly when trying to calm a distressed child, which leaves the child feeling that you just don't get it!

## Teach belly breathing

Deep, slow regulating breaths focus the attention in the present and slow down the rapid breathing linked to fight and flight.

Get the child to put her hand or small soft toy on her belly and breathe right down into her belly so her belly expands and the toy or her hand lifts up.

Breathe in for a count of three, hold for one and then breathe out slowly for a count of four. Repeat until she feels calmer.

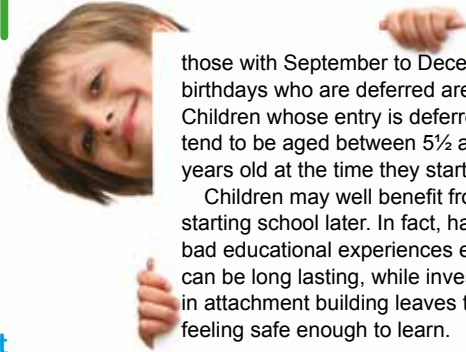
Practise this with your child so that she knows how to do it anytime she feels anxious.



## Starting school

**“Primary schooling can only build on what has gone before. Children will have experienced four to five years of development and learning before entering primary school and their pre- school experience provides many of the building blocks for the rest of their lives”**

The Early Childhood Forum



those with September to December birthdays who are deferred are not. Children whose entry is deferred will tend to be aged between 5½ and 6 years old at the time they start school.

Children may well benefit from starting school later. In fact, having bad educational experiences early on can be long lasting, while investing in attachment building leaves them feeling safe enough to learn.

To make the transition as easy as possible, consider the following:

**I**n Scotland, the school year begins in mid-August. Children born between March and August start school in the August of, or following, their fifth birthday. Those born between September and February start school in the August prior to their fifth birthday. As such, children in Scotland usually start school between the ages of 4½ and 5½ years old.

However, parents of children born between September and December can request to defer their child's entry to the following August. These deferrals are not automatic and are subject to approval by the local education authority. Parents of children born in January and February may also choose to defer their child's entry; these requests are automatically approved. Children with birthdays in January and February and whose entry to school is deferred are eligible for a further year of funded pre-school education whereas

**1 Find a school that best suits your child's needs.** This is likely to be one that is most inclusive, not highest achieving. It is worth asking if there are other adopted or looked after children in the school and how the school provides for them. Good schools for our children are high on nurture, tight on structure and flexible about individual needs.

**2 Visit the school several times before your child starts.** Locate areas like the cloakroom, toilets and dinner hall together; meet the teacher, pop in for story time, etc. Let the child explore their classroom and see that it is fun and safe. Plan these transition arrangements with the school before the previous school year ends.

**3 Help the school to understand your child's strengths and difficulties.** Use the sheets at the back of this booklet. Develop a good relationship with the school and the class teacher – the more attuned the teacher, the better the experience for your child.

**4 Try to arrange for a key adult.** See Relationships (page 32). For more details see *Inside I'm Hurting* or *Book 1 of The Attachment Aware Series* by Louise Bombèr.

### Choosing a school

Parents have the right to express a preference for which school their child attends. If you wish your child to go to a school other than the one designated by your local council, you need to contact the council. If you wish your child to attend a school run by a different council, you need to contact that council. See the Scottish government publication, *Choosing a School: A Guide for Parents*.



**5 Rehearse and role play situations that are likely to crop up.** Play provides a safe way to practise new skills and situations. Practise simple things like changing into PE kit and what happens at lunchtime as well as how to ask the teacher for help, or what to do if you have an accident. Likewise, you can role play responses to difficult situations like getting frustrated with games. Assume the role of the child and together act out how he could have done things differently.

**6 Familiarise the child with what's coming next and when things start and finish.** Ask the teacher in advance about the daily routine and produce a visual timetable of how each school day is broken up including home time and your evening routine. Stick to the timetable or provide advance notice of change.

**7 Plan and organise clothes, equipment, lunch etc with your child each evening.** Think out loud as you do it, for example, "let's check that your reading book is in your bag", or "bring me your drinks bottle so we can wash it for morning". These daily rituals develop executive function skills and help children feel safe.

**8 Provide transitional objects and sensory reminders of home** to help your child feel safe when apart from you (see Permanency and constancy, page 15).

**9 Ask the school to provide safe spaces.** See The school environment (page 31).

**10 Arrange an exit strategy before a crisis.**

Schools need to be aware that children with a trauma history are likely to struggle with separation and stress. They need a pre-arranged exit strategy to prevent meltdowns, shamed-based behaviours or even school refusal. These can be simple breaks from school that allow attachments with family to grow – perhaps staggered attendance, a regular afternoon out with dad mid-week, or some other arrangement that suits the child's attachment needs.

## Liz and David's story

We refused to let our son start school until he got a classroom assistant. His behaviour was impulsive so he was offered behavioural management but denied an assessment. We appealed. Initially, he got three hours' support a day so he went to school for three hours a day. After an additional support needs assessment he got a full-time classroom assistant. He is now managing well!

## Alternatives to school

The law does not require you to send your child to school, but you must ensure they receive efficient education suitable for their age, ability and aptitude. You may decide that the best option for your child is flexi-schooling, a combination of attendance at school and home schooling or complete home schooling, where the child does not attend school at all and is educated at home. If your child is enrolled in a local authority school (not nursery), you must seek the consent of your education authority to withdraw your child. Write to your local Director of Education, enclosing an outline of how you intend to efficiently educate your child. Excellent information is available on the Schoolhouse website, [www.schoolhouse.org.uk](http://www.schoolhouse.org.uk).

# Classroom and school spaces

**S**chool environments 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. A key adult can walk and talk the child through the corridors, checking locks on doors, the school entry system and the various nooks and crannies in the classroom so he can relax and make the most of the learning opportunities on offer.

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. Try to keep the child with a friend who is a positive influence. Never threaten to move the friend away as it can trigger loss and insecurity.

## Unstructured times

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. Children can only enjoy freedom and fun when it feels safe, otherwise reduced boundaries can invite chaos.

## Give children regular brain breaks.

Dr. Bruce Perry, a child psychologist and expert in developmental trauma, recommends introducing quiet periods during the day to allow the brain to "catch up", process new experiences and improve memory and attention. Movement breaks also help concentration. Activities like jumping jacks take only a few minutes between subjects and leave children ready to focus again.



## Safe place/calm corner

Children may climb under a desk, hide, run off or simply 'switch off' when frightened or over-stimulated. If they are to learn anything they will need time out to get regulated. Providing a sensory-comforting safe space in the classroom (and elsewhere in school) can allow them to do this. It could be a cushion-filled corner behind the book case or a pop-up tent with beanbag and soothing music on headphones. Ideally, the child would go to the space with a trusted adult. He needs to know that it is a place of safety because you care and not a punishment zone. Some children self-select to retreat when things get too much, teachers can suggest a calm time, or may slot regular refreshers into his planner. As always, structure and supervision are essential.



# Relationships with teachers



\* Mindfulness involves being in the moment, paying attention to events and your responses to them with openness, curiosity, and acceptance.

**I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. ... In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanised or dehumanised.**

Haim Ginott

**T**he focus of a traumatised 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. Children feel safe when adults are predictable and nice to be around. If the timetable is consistent but the teacher is not, the child does not feel safe. It is important for the child to know for example, that, "our teacher never shouts when angry and always helps children who are upset", etc. Traumatized children tend to think in absolutes. 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.

### Key things 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. The section on permanency has other ideas on using transitional objects to help with this. 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 he can't see them, and that he (the child) exists even when you can't see him. When children hide, they want to be found. It shows you've remembered them!

- **Acknowledge the 'big ask'.** In an effort to encourage children we often minimise their struggles with comments like, "you can do this, it's easy". But, if it was easy they would do it. Children feel validated when we acknowledge, "I know this is hard..." Louise Bomber uses the phrase, "It's a big ask..." to soften any request. Similarly, try, "Let's" as in "Let's see if we can work this out together." so the child knows you are alongside.

- **Behaviour is communication** and management strategies regarding eye contact (difficult for traumatised children), touch, authoritative tone, behaviour charts etc, need to be reconsidered for traumatised children. Please read and practise the PLACE attitude (page 13).

- **Have compassion, not pity.** Adopted children don't need us to compensate for their past, just to recognise its impact. Everyone needs consequences for their actions. Be firm but kind, sad rather than angry and curious about what prompted misdemeanours. (See discipline, page 24).

- **Let the child know you like him.** If he has been out of school, welcome him back. Send notes home if he is absent, notice nice things about him, even if they are small or hard to find! Try to think of small tasks that would make him feel valued.

- **Never underestimate how stressed and anxious a child might be feeling.** Even Superkid can be just a scared kid in a costume.

- **Support attachment relationships.** Although it is important to have a nurturing relationship with the child, please respect that the parent/child relationship must come first. Children with attachment difficulties

can be indiscriminately friendly with adults, while rejecting their parents, which is not healthy. Send hug tokens home for parents rather than giving hugs in school. Remind the child how pleased Mum or Dad will be with his work or behaviour (while it is going well). Avoid warning that parents would be angry or disappointed with work or behaviour.

*Hi Jack,  
Sorry to hear you  
are sick. We all miss  
you in class and hope you get  
better quickly. We know your  
family are taking really good  
care of you and that makes  
us happy.  
See you soon,  
Mr Campbell and all of  
Primary 3*

## The key adult

**"In order to develop normally... somebody has to be crazy about that kid. Someone has to be there and be doing something together with the child."** Urie Bronfenbrenner

Teacher and therapist Louise Bomber recommends the appointment of a sensitive key adult as a substitute attachment figure for the child in school. The key adult is additional to the class teacher and while the teacher may change every year, the key adult should be available to the child for at least two to three years. The key adult is often a classroom assistant, who has time to work with the child, the ability to stay regulated when the child is dysregulated, who can practise the PLACE attitude, advocate for the child and build his self-esteem.

## Finally...

- **Whole class nurturing supports children with a wide range of needs. Check out sites like [www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org) and [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org) for emotional literacy ideas, while being mindful of how topics might affect adopted children.**
- **Traumatised children often learn best through sight, touch and movement. A multi-sensory approach that caters for different learning styles gives all children a chance to work in the way they learn best.**
- **Techniques used to support children with ASD, can also work for traumatised children when used with knowledge of attachment and trauma.**



## Relationships with friends

**“When people have a wealth of relationships in high quantities and of good quality, they are physically and emotionally healthier, more cognitively enriched, and they reach their potential to be humane in ways that are impossible without relationships.”**

Dr. Bruce Perry MD, PhD, Child Psychologist

**C**hildren with attachment difficulties often struggle to make or keep friends. They may not share or play nicely, have poor social skills, problems with intimacy, may bully or be bullied. Often it is a combination of factors, complicated by the fact that adopted children are often serial honeymooners – they are fine with relationships until there are challenges – then they end them, fearing rejection or hurt. In order to develop lasting supportive relationships they need to learn how to repair relationships.

### Model quick repair

Children learn to repair relationships from their parents, carers, teachers and peers. When there is a break in your relationship with the child, either through absence, discipline, misunderstanding or conflict, take the initiative with repair. Perhaps invite the child to do a task, let her know that you are no longer annoyed with her, make her aware of your intentions and model saying sorry. For example, “Hey Sarah, looks like you are still cross with me. I’m sorry you missed out on rounders. It’s just my job

to keep everyone safe. You’ll get a chance to practise again tomorrow. Come and help me with the pencils!” When friends fall out, intervene to help them make amends.

### Nurture friendships

Parents can invite classmates home after school and keep a close eye on play. Be aware that our children tend to do better one to one and find it difficult to manage groups. Try not to withdraw play with friends or invites to parties when a child misbehaves, think of a different consequence. Teachers can involve budding friends in joint projects, or set up social skills groups. Getting involved in clubs also encourages co-operative play in a supervised setting.

### Structure free time and practise dependence

Remember “think toddler”. Leaving a child with attachment difficulties unsupervised at break times is like leaving a toddler alone in a playground. Our children need a key adult to supervise and structure their playtime and keep them regulated. Remember, children who could not depend on



anyone early in life need to practise dependency before moving towards independence in tiny steps. Look out for children sitting alone and organise an activity or game to encourage co-operative play.

### Teach games

When children learn games, they have the tools for engagement and can invite other children to play with them. Attachment focused games such as Theraplay® involve structure, engagement, nurture and very slight challenge. Playing a group Theraplay® game in the mornings or after a break can help all children reconnect, feel safe and settle to learn.

A book called *Fun to Grow on: Engaging Play Activities for Kids with Teachers, Parents and Grandparents* by Virginia K. Morin, is a wonderful resource for Theraplay®-type activities.

# Times of change

**T**imes of change threaten many adopted children's sense of safety and self esteem. Because changes in the past involved loss and fear, even small changes in routine, or fun things like a school trip, can trigger the feeling that bad things may happen. Some changes affect some children more than others. You may notice increased or decreased arousal, regressive behaviour or loss of skills at transition times, particularly when a teacher is absent and at the start and end of term.

- **Arrange a handover.** Some parents find it helps to hand over and collect their child from a trusted adult every day. It can build attachment security to exchange a transitional object as well. The child could carry a sensory reminder of Mum or Dad like a photo or Mum's perfume on her sleeve, and the key adult could exchange an object such as a friendship bracelet at home time to help the child feel 'held in mind' even when out of sight.

- **Give prior warning.** Change is unavoidable, but how we manage it for the child makes a big difference to how they deal with it. Where possible, tell them in advance and adapt the planner to match.

Remember, it is a big deal if the teacher or classroom assistant changes. You may not know about the absence until the start of the school day. Ask the adult involved in the handover to explain before the child goes into class to find a stranger in the teacher's place. The adult should use empathy to show the child that they 'get it' that this is tough. Something like, "Things will be a wee bit different today because Miss A is off sick and Mr B is taking her place. I think it's just for today, but I'll let you know if it's not. I know you don't like it when Miss A is off but remember I will be here all day and we will follow our usual timetable. Now let's go and meet Mr B."

Be as clear as possible about why the teacher is absent, so the child doesn't feel to blame. If a trusted adult is to leave permanently, let the child know well in advance so she has time to grieve and be comforted through the transition.

- **Walk children through changes in routine.** It is much more powerful to do this with a trusted adult alongside than simply to talk about it and assume they know what it will be like.

- **Do what you say you will do, be where you are meant to be.** Pick up and collect your child from school at the same place, same time every day. Even nominate a special place. Give her no chance to panic. If your child gets out at 3pm, be there at 2.50pm. If you can't make it ring ahead and make sure the child is informed.

- **Don't change anything unless you really have to.** Routine and structure are vital.

## Flash points

Start and end of term  
Teacher, teaching assistant, key adult or friend is absent  
Moving child or friend to a different seat.  
Start and end of day  
Settling after break  
School trips  
Any change to the timetable or routine  
Moving up to secondary level

## School topics

### Literature

My daughter adores animals. When she was in Primary 4, she had a great teacher who tried to encourage her to read by giving her books about animals. I remember her bringing home a story about a donkey, which she would not open and couldn't say why. I was baffled until I discovered that the story was about a donkey that'd lost his mum. Mystery solved!



**O**ur school curriculum is based on the premise that family life is good and so it is littered with topics about babyhood, family trees, personal timelines, local culture, and traditional family units. Parents can minimise possible distress by getting a curriculum forecast from school about what topics are coming up and when. You can then tackle issues in two ways:

**1** Liaise with the teacher about adapting topics to respect the experiences of every child in the class.

**2** Prepare the child in advance by providing strategies and cover stories. This is better than removing the child from class when topics arise, as this only encourages avoidance of painful subjects and can draw attention to the child.

### Tricky topics in primary school include:

◆ **Babyhood Projects** involving baby photographs can distress children who may not have photos or happy memories. Teachers could vary the task by asking all the class for a favourite childhood photo, or the child could bring in a photo of any baby.

◆ **Family trees** Perhaps a family orchard, or a tree with roots and branches could work. Issues about origins also affect step families, looked after children, and many more children who do not fit the traditional family unit.

◆ **Race and ethnicity** it takes sensitivity to celebrate culture and identity with children who are racially different from their adoptive parents. Teachers and parents can work together to identify ways to help a child value their origins while feeling part of their adoptive family.

◆ **Mother's/Father's day.** Although some children delight in making loving tributes to parents, others are upset

by these and celebrations such as Christmas and birthdays. Even if a child says nothing be alert to the non-verbal cues. Sometimes permission to make a "caring person" card is all it takes.

◆ **Animal sponsorship** The idea of 'adopting' abused or abandoned animals can give offensive and confusing messages to adopted children. 'Sponsorship' is a more acceptable (and accurate) term.

◆ **PE** Children who have been abused may be reluctant to remove their clothes in company.

◆ **Personal history** Life story events such as "going into foster care" and "being adopted" loom large in a child's mind and they may panic about revealing their story. One boy wouldn't do his homework because he said, "I have to write what happened when I was five and I got adopted when I was five." His mum reassured him that he also moved house and he could put that in instead.

### Caring at sharing times

Although activities like circle time can encourage openness and understanding they can present problems when a child's experience is way outside the norm. One mother tells of her son's 'news' that his birth brother was going to prison for murder. Another child explained her grief at her birth mother's death from drug misuse by saying her hamster had died. Adults need to be mindful of children's experiences and potential crisis times such as birth family contact, by giving children cover stories for difficult situations.

# Homework



**O**pinions vary about the benefits of homework in primary school. Many of us feel the school day is long and stressful enough and our children need a break before another one begins. Relationships are at the heart of our children's problems so families need to spend time building connections, not arguing over homework. Adopters often manage the home/school balance by leaving school work at school and keeping home as home. Alternatively, you can agree with school about how much homework is enough and what to do when the child cannot do any at all.

Some of the following strategies might help. Remember every child is different and what works for one won't work for all.

◆ **Use homework club.** Some children can just about manage school if school work ends when they go home. Being in the school environment, in uniform, with school staff may also keep the child in learning mode rather than having to re-engage at home. The downside is that it makes the school day longer.

**“Life would be much easier without spellings. I don't know if it's the pressure to learn them or the shame of getting them wrong, but they're a nightmare”**

Karen, mum of two

◆ **Agree a time limit with the school and stick to it, even if work is not finished.** Some experts think this should be 10 minutes per year group, e.g. 10 minutes in Primary 1, 20 minutes in Primary 2, etc. Use a timer or a big clock as a visual and/or audible reminder of when homework ends. Not having a stop time before you start can feel like homework lasts forever.

◆ **Have a snack and a game of hide and seek first.** Some children need a nurture break followed by the joy of finding or being found by mum or dad before sitting down to an agreed short period of homework.

## By gum

Chewing gum, just until it loses its flavour can help children concentrate. If you don't like gum, dried apricots work as well.

**Catriona has a son in Primary 4 and a daughter in Primary 6.**

**“Of all the things we've done, using a visual planner for each child is by far the best. The kids can see that homework lasts only a short amount of time and we can do other things afterwards like walk the dog, have tea, etc. We also use a timer and agree that homework lasts no longer than 30 minutes for my son and 45 minutes for my daughter.”**

## Memory games

Spellings and tables can cause problems for children because they are either right or wrong, so you can't hide that you don't know them and that can trigger shame. Also, short-term memory problems mean a child can learn work at home, but forget it when they go into school. Being told off by a teacher increases the child's frustration, shame and unwillingness to learn. Playing spelling games, and chanting times tables to music, can help children remember better. Speak to your school's support for learning staff about ways to engage children in homework through play.

◆ **Stay in school uniform until it is done.** This creates a clear division between school stuff and home stuff.

◆ **Give a limited choice.** Perhaps, “homework before playtime or 10 minutes play now and then reading”. Or dive straight in there with, “Okay, loveliest girl, what’s first, reading or sums?”

◆ **Don’t be too keen.** If it looks like homework is more important to you than it is to the child, she won’t do it. Be relaxed and casual in your tone of voice, body language and facial expression and give a clear choice. E.g., “That’s okay, do homework or don’t do it. It’s your homework and your choice. I’ll let you sort it out with Mr X tomorrow.” You have to have the confidence to pull this off and give the child time to think through the consequences. Whatever she decides, stay loving!

**“The child who learns to read while sitting in Mummy or Daddy’s lap will become a lifelong learner. In contrast, the child who is made to sit still and listen and read in a classroom where there is no tolerance for play, touch or movement during this highly cognitive activity will learn to read – but will often come to hate reading... Reading builds networks in the cortex: the area of the brain responsible for planning and impulse control. And reading fiction... is essentially practising empathy.”**

Dr. Bruce Perry, Born for Love

## Attendance and absences

**M**ost children have days when they don’t want to go to school, and although it is unusual for primary school children to refuse to attend school at all, they may struggle to do a full week. Problems often start in Primary 3 or 4, when children have a longer day and harder work.

At this age they also start to understand loss better and may need reassured that their adoptive family is forever. It is not unusual for children to get sick at lunchtime so they can go home and reconnect with family. Others may feel ‘burned out’ mid-week.

The information regarding stress, permanency, transitions and safe spaces also applies here. In addition, try the following:

◆ **Attend to the first signs of anxiety.** Empathise, validate and be curious about solutions to the child’s worries. Rather than say, “Don’t be silly, there’s nothing to worry about”, try “I can see doing a whole week at school is hard for you, what could we do to make it easier?”, or, “Looks like you get sick a lot these days, I’m glad you get better quickly at home. I wonder if we could take a little bit of home into school so you feel better there.” It is vital to say this sincerely so it doesn’t come across as mocking or sarcastic.

◆ **Staggered attendance and reduced timetables.** If children are shut down or acting out, they are not learning and forcing them to stay at school in that state could put them off completely. Prearranged breaks, shorter days or weeks can help a child keep attending or ease them back into school if they have been absent. This needs to be agreed and timetable rather than the child electing to leave when he feels like it. A child who has been off school will need a great deal of support to return and should be eased back gently. Think toddler! Take tiny steps!

◆ **What school can do**  
Rather than point out what may happen if they don’t go to school, teachers can show a child that they like them and miss them when they are not around. Ringing home to chat to the child if their attendance drops off, or sending a, “Thinking of You” card can help a child feel valued as a person and a member of the class, rather than a name on the register.

When absences are frequent or prolonged, the Education Authority may become involved as well as the school to try to resolve the problem.



# Social stories

**P**arents and teachers can use social stories to help children cope with difficult situations in school. These short stories describe:

- what people do in a given situation
- why they do it
- common responses in that situation

They refer to specific social situations that would be obvious to most of us but not to people with impaired social understanding. Social stories were developed by Carol Gray in the early 1990s, originally to teach social and life skills to children on the autistic spectrum. They are now also used with children who have attachment difficulties.

The stories use words and pictures to give clear, concise and accurate information about specific situations. They help to teach routines, expectations, and behaviours in a non-lecturing way, while visual examples reinforce learning and the individualised stories connect children with the learning process.

Stories should always affirm the child and show them doing well. Although the aim is not to change the child's behaviour, increased understanding of situations and expectations may help them to respond more effectively in challenging situations.

## How to make a social story

You can either choose a ready-made social story from resources in books or online (e.g. [www.asdvisualaids.com](http://www.asdvisualaids.com)) or create your own to suit your child's needs (see [www.thegraycenter.org](http://www.thegraycenter.org)).

Here's how:

**1** Make a list of the steps in the routine you want your child to work on, for example, starting homework or getting ready for school.

**2** Write a simple sentence to explain each step, for example "open your bag and take out your book".

**3** Beside each sentence, draw a picture or insert a photo of the child performing the action.

**4** Go through the completed story with your child every time before they perform the routine or activity.

**5** Encourage the child to review it himself before a routine or activity.

**6** Slowly wean the child off the story when they can do the task correctly and consistently.

Social stories help children who

- struggle with social skills and situations like queuing for lunch, behaving in the playground, meeting and greeting, asking for help, etc
- have problems with organisation and executive functions
- need reinforcement of rules, routines and procedures
- do not respond to cues, redirection or refocusing
- fail to meet reasonable expectations

## Sample story: Lining up

**1** My name is Jack and I go to Park Primary School



**2** At school, we sometimes line up

**3** We line up to go to lunch, to go out to play, and to get on the bus



**4** Sometimes my friends and I get excited when we line up, because we're going somewhere fun, or out to play

**5** It is okay to be excited and still I need to stay in line



**6** Messing about can cause accidents, and my friends or I could get hurt

**7** When a teacher tells me to line up nicely it is so we can all stay safe



**8** I will try to keep my place in the line

# Working together with the school

**T**his section deals with additional support needs.

Parents may feel that an assessment for additional support needs will benefit their child, which may be true for some adopted children, but not for all. Even children without an assessment still need school staff to be mindful of their attachment and trauma histories so they feel safe and settled to learn.

Available, responsive and empathic adults make a huge difference to our children. What additional support often secures is a helper or assistant offering shared or one-to-one support several hours a week. The presence of an attuned assistant provides a safe base for the child even when the teacher is not around, keeps them regulated, focused and on task, offers encouragement and lets the child know, "I am here because you are worth it."

In fact, most children's educational needs can be provided for between school and home. Many adopted children who have finished school will say

it was the attitude of teachers and the ethos of the school that shaped their experience. Undoubtedly, working together reaps rewards for everyone as information sharing is critical in helping children achieve. It helps the school to see that adoptive parents did not cause this child's problems – they are part of the solution; it helps parents to understand the challenges facing teachers, and that they too are part of the solution, and it helps the child to have a team of supportive adults on his side!

### So what do schools need to know?

- The school needs to know that your child is adopted! Adoption means a child has specific needs relating to separation, loss, trust, safety, stress, executive functions and family dynamics. Keeping your child's adoption a secret will almost certainly disadvantage them.
- Family must come first! Education is not everything; supporting the attachment between a child and his parents is vital.
- Information and training on attachment and developmental trauma.
- Information about your child specifically (see All About Me in Teachers' Notes, p49).
- It is important for teachers to be nurturing, but they should not compromise the parent/child attachment relationship.
- Your strategies so staff can mirror them in school.
- That the child is doing the best they can.

### Parents need to know that

- Teachers are human too! Most teachers try to do the best they can for every child within the confines of limited time, limited knowledge, limited resources and limited super powers!
- Education is not all – the cognitive brain is built on the emotional brain; family must come first!
- It's important to get involved – Help the school with summer transitions, taking photos of your child's new classroom and making an 'All about me' booklet for new teachers. You could also offer to volunteer if this doesn't unsettle your child.

- The child is doing the best they can.

### Keeping in touch stops divide and rule...

Children who don't trust adults' motives may try to manage people around them by divide and rule/splitting. They fail to deliver messages and tell tales on teachers. Having regular contact and direct communication between home and school can pre-empt problems and greatly reduce the child's ability to divide and rule.



# Legislation and guidance

In Scotland a child or young person is said to have 'additional support needs' if they need more – or different support – to what is normally provided in schools or pre-schools to children of the same age.

The framework for supporting children who require additional support with their learning is set out in the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 as amended (the ASL Act) and the accompanying 'Supporting Children's Learning' Code of Practice.

The ASL Act states that the education of a child with additional support needs should be directed to "the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential".

Additional support needs do not just refer to children who have long-term learning difficulties or physical disabilities. Children who have experienced loss, are being bullied, have emotional, social or behaviour difficulties, are young carers, have communication issues or have been abused or neglected may need additional support. A child may need support for a short time, or if their needs are more complicated, they might need help for longer.

The ASL Act places a duty on local authorities to identify and provide for any additional support needs a child may have. This means that local authorities, normally through their schools, must arrange to identify any barriers to learning that a child may have. There is then a duty to provide "adequate and efficient"

**"It is not uncommon for teachers working with traumatised children to observe that the children are really smart, but they do not learn easily... they are often diagnosed with learning difficulties."** Dr Bruce Perry

support as is required by that child and keep this under review. The support should enable a child to work towards achieving the best they can in all areas of their education.

How the support is given or the amount of support to be provided is not covered by law as every child is different; in order to decide what support a particular child will require, the local authority should arrange for assessments to be carried out. Support should then be provided for that child, based on the advice of the professionals doing the assessments.

Under the ASL Act there is also a duty to take into account the views of the child, their parents and any information that a parent may bring to their attention.

## Advice for parents and carers

It is worth bearing in mind that the definition of 'parent' goes much further than birth parent or anyone with parental responsibilities and parental rights. It also includes anyone with care of the child, which means anyone they live with. So where the child lives with a prospective adopter, that person has the power to ask for the provisions of the 2004 Act to be put into place. If you think your child may have additional support needs, discuss your concerns first with their pre-school or school. They may already be aware

of your child's needs and be providing suitable support. If not, you should discuss with them the options available for assessing your child.

You have the right to ask your local authority to carry out a specific assessment or examination at any time, although you cannot insist upon a particular kind of assessment (for example, the type of assessment test used) or ask for a particular person to carry it out. If your child is over 16 and has capacity (is able to understand what is being asked and any decision made), they have the right to ask for their needs to be assessed. As of 2017, children aged 12 and over with capacity will have the same rights.

You can also refer your child yourself or ask your GP or health visitor to refer your child to some agencies, such as occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or mental health services. You should keep your child's school informed of any referrals you make.



# Planning Children's Learning

## Personal Learning Planning (PLP)

All children should be involved in personal learning planning. It is a way of thinking about, talking about and planning what and how a child learns. It's also a way of assessing their progress and acting on the results of that assessment. For many children, PLP will be enough to arrange and monitor their learning, development and progress.

## Individual Educational Programme (IEP)

If a child's support needs can be met by the school or education department, but requires more detailed planning than PLP offers, a child may have an Individual Educational Programme (IEP). (In some local authority areas these are called Additional Support Plans or similar). An IEP sets out a child's learning needs and the support that will be put in place to meet them. It should contain specific, short-term learning targets and may also include longer-term targets or aims to support the child's development.

## A Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP)

Children with complex needs may require a Co-ordinated Support Plan. A CSP is a detailed plan of how a child's support will be provided. It is a legal document and aims to ensure all the professionals who are supporting a child work together.



It also helps ensure that everyone, including the child and parents or carers, is involved in that support. A child may be considered for a CSP if they:

- have complex or multiple factors that have a significantly adverse affect on their learning and,
- their support needs are likely to last for more than a year and,
- they require support from one or more agency other than education (such as health or social work).

Under the ASL Act all looked after children should be considered for a CSP.

## Staged Intervention

Every child may need support at some point in their lives

and in many cases this can be managed through normal classroom and teaching practice. When additional support is needed this is usually managed through a staged intervention process. At the lower stages of a staged intervention process support can usually be managed within the school or education department and children may have a PLP or IEP. In the upper stages, support will be required from outside of education (for example from health or social work) and children may require a CSP.

Each local authority will have their own approach to providing support. Information on local support, planning and provision should be available on their website.

Developmental trauma' is not a well known diagnosis and while adopted children can have learning difficulties such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), they often have complex difficulties that do not fit these categories. However, children do not need to meet specific criteria or need specific interventions in order to gain additional support. Indeed it may take time to understand the child's issues and needs, particularly when children are young or newly placed, before an assessment can be made.

The effects of developmental trauma can appear similar to other learning difficulties,

for example, similarities in behaviour and executive functioning as seen in ASD. So they can often be supported, (in part) by similar strategies regardless of the label, in addition to addressing their attachment and trauma needs.

It is a challenge for adopters to secure the right support. Not all children will qualify for IEPs or CSPs. The key is really to work closely with the school as even without an assessment or medical diagnosis, schools can adapt existing resources and strategies to suit our children.

Depending on a child's needs, different levels of planning may be required to meet their needs.

### **Morag's story**

"I got support for my daughter when she was diagnosed with FAS. The school recognised this as a medical condition, whereas when I talked about attachment and trauma I was treated like a neurotic mother! The diagnosis meant she could have "a helper" and an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Although this helped, she was still anxious and easily upset by loud, demanding, or sarcastic teachers. I learned that even with a diagnosis it is still important to address the attachment issues not covered by specific support for a diagnosed condition."

### **Before the adoption order**

Before the adoption order, children placed for adoption are classed as Looked After Children (LAC). All looked after children in Scotland are assumed to have additional support needs unless assessed otherwise. Given that many adopted children will previously have been in care, their additional support needs should have been identified as soon as they were placed in care (or when they moved into a new local authority). It is also worth noting that a child who may not previously have been assessed as requiring extra support may need extra support to cope with the disruptions that can occur when leaving a foster family/home or changing school.





## Supporting Children's Learning: Code of Practice (Revised edition)

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 ('the Act') as amended introduces the framework for providing for children and young people who require it, some additional help with their learning. The Act aims to ensure that all children and young people are provided with the necessary support to help them work towards achieving their full potential. It also promotes collaborative working among all those supporting children and young people.

This code explains the duties on education authorities and other agencies to support children's and young people's learning. It provides guidance on the Act's provisions as well as on the supporting framework of secondary legislation. Education authorities and appropriate agencies, such as NHS Boards and social work services, are under a duty to have regard to the code when carrying out their functions under the Act.

## Fiona and Alistair's story

"We asked for an assessment when our child was in Primary 1 and was already being left behind. Initially, the local authority refused but we appealed with the help of a psychologist's report, an occupational therapist's report and the school, who backed us all the way. He is now in Primary 4 and is doing extremely well. He gets three hours a day of one-to-one support which helps him to sit still and focus on his work. It makes a big difference that he likes his helper and she likes him. I would urge parents not to give up if you don't get an assessment the first time you ask. Work with your school, get expert advice and try again."

## Advice and Information

In Scotland, Enquire provides information and advice about additional support for learning. They offer this to parents, carers, professionals and young people. As well as a telephone helpline (0345 123 2303), they also have a range of publications including the Parents' Guide to Additional Support for Learning and 18 factsheets on specific topics including assessment, planning children's learning and more. Enquire also provides advice about resolving disagreements between families, schools or local authorities should they arise.

More information can be found on Enquire's website for parents, carers and practitioners [www.enquire.org.uk](http://www.enquire.org.uk). They also have a website for young people [www.reach.scot](http://www.reach.scot).

## Support Plans

Whether your child has a PLP, IEP or CSP your help is essential in their planning and review. Plans need to be employed in conjunction with strategies that also address any trauma history, attachment needs and developmental gaps. For example:

### Attachment needs

Children need to feel safe and settled to learn. So, a child may have a target to 'sit still on the mat' but she would find it impossible if the alarm in her brain triggered a rush of adrenalin in her body.

### Developmental gaps

There are things some children simply cannot do, not because they lack intelligence, but because they did not complete the developmental phase due to crisis in their early lives. For example, many adopted children only have the attention span of a toddler, so it is more effective to set targets and employ an attitude and strategies that suit a toddler, rather than a school-age child.

**Behavioural management strategies**, which work with the cognitive part of the brain, may not benefit children who cannot control their impulses. Instead, school staff can work with the child as if they were much younger, learning to read their behaviour as a way of signalling their needs and helping them develop self-control through self-awareness. Working with traumatised children is about building new connections in the brain and this happens within the context of positive relationships rather than positive reinforcement.

# Appeals and complaints

**Y**ou can challenge any decision made about your child's educational needs if you feel he has been unfairly treated or his needs have been misunderstood.

## Start with the school

Talk to the class or learning support teacher first. Schools usually have a procedure for contacting or speaking to a particular member of staff. Ask the school office. Contact a senior teacher if you still have concerns. If after that you're still not satisfied with the way the school has dealt with your concern you should write a formal letter of complaint to the head teacher. Most concerns can be resolved by speaking to the school.

## Contact the local authority

If you've raised your complaint with the head teacher at your child's school and still have concerns, contact the additional support for learning or quality improvement officer in your local authority. [www.enquire.org.uk/local-authorities](http://www.enquire.org.uk/local-authorities)

If matters remain unresolved the council officer must tell you about other ways to resolve the disagreement such as your right to access independent mediation or how to make a formal complaint to the local authority.



## Other options

These involve people who do not work for the local authority.

## Education Appeal Committee

Appointed by the Council for appeals against decisions to exclude a child or refusal of certain placing requests.

## Independent adjudication

If you disagree with the local authority's decision about the kind of additional support needs your child has you can use independent adjudication. [www.enquire.org.uk/information/factsheets/resolving-disputes-using-independent-adjudication](http://www.enquire.org.uk/information/factsheets/resolving-disputes-using-independent-adjudication)

## Additional Support Needs Tribunals

For appeals regarding children who have or may require a CSP, failure to provide the support in a CSP or certain placing request refusals. [www.asntscotland.gov.uk](http://www.asntscotland.gov.uk)

## Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)

Although the above procedures are the usual route for appeals and complaints, you can also contact SPSO. They are independent of councils but have limitations. For example they can't look at complaints that have been dealt with in Court or change decisions that have been made following proper process. [www.spsso.org.uk](http://www.spsso.org.uk)

# Support and advocacy

### Legal action

Exceptionally a few cases may go to:

#### The Sheriff Court

This Court can hear further appeals against decisions by the Education Appeal Committee about certain placing requests and exclusions.

#### Scottish Ministers

You can make a complaint to Scottish Ministers if you think the local authority has failed to carry out its duties under education law. This is called a Section 70 complaint.

#### The Court of Session

A decision made by the Additional Support Needs Tribunals may be appealed on a point of law to the Court of Session in Edinburgh. In cases where no other right of appeal is available, a decision made by a local authority or other public body may be challenged through judicial review by the Court of Session.

You might find it helpful to take a supporter or advocate to meetings. A supporter can be a friend, relative, befriender or worker from a voluntary organisation. For advocacy services in your area, contact Enquire or the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance.

[www.siaa.org.uk](http://www.siaa.org.uk) (0131 556 6443)

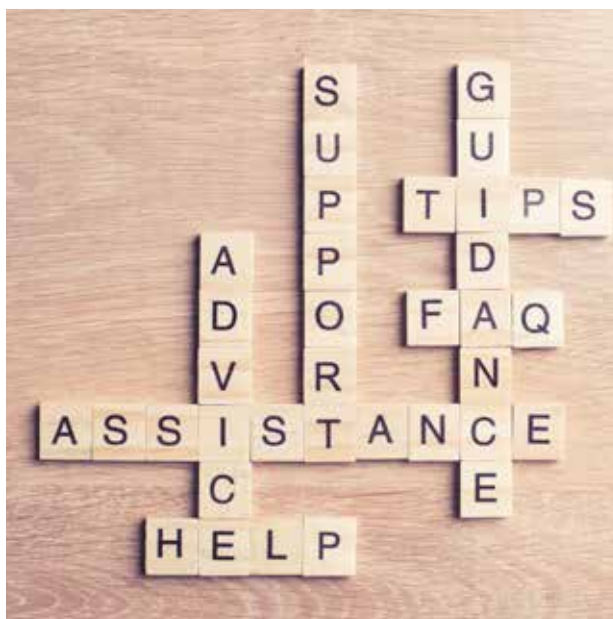
**Let's Talk** is the national advocacy service for appeals to the ASN Tribunals about additional support for learning. Email: [letstalkasn@edlaw.org.uk](mailto:letstalkasn@edlaw.org.uk) (0141 445 1955)

#### Independent mediation

At any stage you can think about using independent mediation. Most disagreements about the education of children with additional support needs can be referred to an independent mediation service. [www.enquire.org.uk/information/factsheets/mediation](http://www.enquire.org.uk/information/factsheets/mediation)

**Clan Childlaw** provide children and young people throughout Scotland with free legal advice and support. [www.clanchildlaw.org](http://www.clanchildlaw.org)

**Scottish Child Law Centre** offers free advice on legal matters relating to children and young people. [www.sclc.org.uk](http://www.sclc.org.uk)



# Resources

## Downloadable papers

[www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org) [www.scholastic.co.uk](http://www.scholastic.co.uk)

**Scholastic Early Childhood Today Emotional Development: Creating an Emotionally Safe Classroom** By Bruce D. Perry MD, PhD

**Executive Function 101** from [fasdnetwork.org](http://fasdnetwork.org)

## Books and DVDs

**Attachment Focused Parenting: Effective strategies to care for children** by Dan Hughes

**Brain-based Parenting: The Neuroscience for Caregiving for Healthy Attachment** by Dan Hughes

**First Steps in Parenting the Child who Hurts: Tiddlers and Toddlers** by Caroline Archer (Jessica Kingsley)

**Inside I'm hurting by** by Louise Michelle Bombèr

**Learn the child** by Kate Cairns (BAAF)

**Next Steps in Parenting the Child who Hurts: Tykes and Teens** by Caroline Archer

**New families, Old scripts: A Guide to the Language of Trauma and Attachment in Adoptive Families** by Caroline Archer and Christine Gordon (Jessica Kingsley)

**Smart but Scattered** by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare

**Safe Place** (DVD) Parenting Strategies For Facilitating Attachment And Sensory Regulations by Dan Hughes and Janet Koomar

**The Attachment Aware School Series: Bridging the Gap for Troubled Pupils** by Louise Bombèr

*Book 1: The Key Adult in School*

*Book 2: The Senior Manager*

*Book 3: The Key Teacher in School*

*Book 4: Team Pupil in School*

*Book 5: The Parent and Carer in School*

**The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog** by Dr Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz

**The Out of Sync Child: Recognising and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder** by Carol Stock Kranowitz

**The Out of Sync Child Has Fun – Activities for Kids with Sensory Processing Disorder** by Carol Kranowitz

**What about me?** by Louise Michelle Bombèr

**Won't do or Can't do**, DVD, leaflets and training from [www.familyfutures.co.uk](http://www.familyfutures.co.uk)

## Organisations providing support and information

**Adoption UK in Scotland** – Unit 1, Duddingston Yards, Duddingston Park South, Edinburgh EH15 3NT. Tel: 0131 201 2488 [www.adoptionuk.org.uk/scotland](http://www.adoptionuk.org.uk/scotland)

**Education Scotland** – Foghlam Alba [www.educationscotland.gov.uk/](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/)

**Enquire** – the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. [www.enquire.org.uk](http://www.enquire.org.uk)

**Inclusive Solutions** – for publications, training and support on working with children with exceptional needs [www.inclusive-solutions.com](http://www.inclusive-solutions.com)

**The Nurture Group Network** [www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org)

**Post Adoption Central Support (PACS)** [www.postadoptioncentralsupport.org](http://www.postadoptioncentralsupport.org)

**Scottish Schools Online website** – provides contact details, links to school websites where available, and statistical and other information for every school.  
[www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk](http://www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk)

**Scottish Government** [www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools](http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools)

**Touchbase** (Louise Bomber) – delivers attachment training across England, Wales and Scotland. [www.touchbase.org.uk](http://www.touchbase.org.uk)

**The Theraplay Institute** is about building better relationships through play.  
[www.theraplay.org](http://www.theraplay.org)

**Reach** - enquire's website for young people having a hard time at school [www.reach.scot](http://www.reach.scot)

**Schoolhouse** - Scotland's national home education support charity [www.schoolhouse.org.uk](http://www.schoolhouse.org.uk)

## Training

Adoption UK provides training solutions for adopters, carers and professionals. Our workshops and courses inform parents and education practitioners of the neurological and psychological effects of early childhood trauma and attachment difficulties. The following event is one example of the sessions we offer:

### **Life in the Classroom: Helping adopted and looked after children in school**

This half or full day training event is aimed at those working with adopted children who are struggling in school. It looks at the causes of trauma and the subsequent impact of developmental trauma on learning. It examines attachment styles and the Dan Hughes model of PLACE which emphasises the benefits of a Playful, Loving, Accepting, Curious and Empathetic approach. The training also explores executive functioning and how early trauma can impact on this.

### **Who is the course aimed at?**

The course is ideal for teachers, classroom assistants and support for learning teachers working with children who are struggling with life in the classroom. Additional workshops for parents can be run alongside the school staff training.

### **Why should I attend?**

This training will enable participants to raise awareness of how trauma and attachment difficulties can impact on education and will allow them to support the adopted or looked after child in the classroom.

Other workshops we run include:

- Telling about Adoption
- Parenting Adopted Teens
- Contact and the Adopted Child
- Foetal Alcohol and Drug-Affected Children
- Sensory Integration
- Domestic Abuse and the Adopted Child
- Self Harm

**adoptionuk**  
for every adoptive family

Please contact Adoption UK in Scotland on 0131 201 2488 or email [scotland@adoptionuk.org.uk](mailto:scotland@adoptionuk.org.uk) for further information on this training.



# Adoption today



**A**doption today is very different from what it was 30 years ago when most children were adopted as very young babies. Many of today's adopted children will have come from a background of abuse and/or neglect and may have had many moves through the care system. If adopted from another country they will likely have spent time in an orphanage. In Scotland in 2015 85% of the children adopted were over two years old. Thus their experiences before adoption will have impacted to some degree on their development.

## Developmental trauma

**Abuse** and neglect in infancy gives a child a deep sense of shame about who they are; they tend not to feel worthy of care, have little trust in adults and frequently feel unsafe in their environment.

Neuroscience shows that a baby's brain grows to 80-90 per cent of its adult size in the first three years of life. Each individual brain develops to ensure our survival in the environment into which we are born, so children born into hostile environments have a brain wired for stress and fear. The damage caused by these early experiences is so pervasive and enduring it is now recognised as developmental trauma. Affected children have many of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder plus learning difficulties and an inability to articulate how they feel because much of the hurt happened before they had developed language.

## Key points about trauma:

- Adoption does not fix it. It can be triggered by stress and sensory reminders for years. When activated, children typically respond by becoming hyperaroused or dissociating.
- All adopted children will have some level of developmental trauma, which can be reactivated by experiences in school.
- The trauma is relational and so it can be

helped by good relationships or triggered by difficult ones. Our children need adults to be trustworthy, and to engage with them in a friendly, fun, nurturing and structured way.

## Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

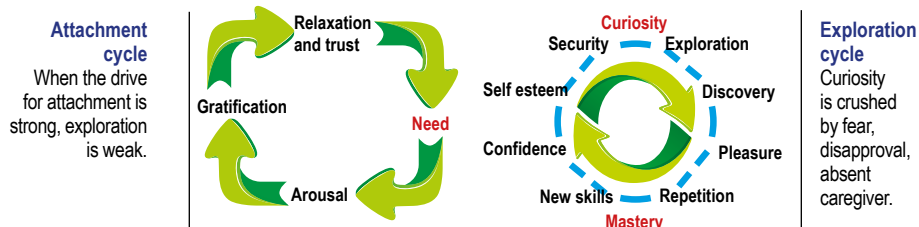
**This is** a developmental trauma that occurs before birth. Some adopted children will have a diagnosis of FASD by the time they start school; many other children may be affected by it but have no diagnosis. FASD and attachment difficulties are growing problems in our schools. Organisations such as NOFAS and FAS Aware UK have great resources.

## Attachment

**Because adopted** children did not get their needs met in infancy, they have an insecure attachment style (even if they are attached to their adoptive parents). This has many implications, but the bottom line is that the child needs to feel physically and emotionally safe in order to benefit from learning opportunities. Feeling unsafe, distressed, or in need, activates the attachment cycle, which in adopted children was not successfully completed in infancy. When the attachment cycle is activated, the exploration cycle becomes inactive and children don't learn. The diagram on p50 is a simple illustration of why it is vital to help children feel safe, calm and cared for.

## Why children need to feel safe to learn

The more available you are, the safer a child feels and the more they are able to learn



### What works for adopted children?

- Nurturing, highly structured environments ✓
- Low stimulation ✓
- The PLACE attitude ✓
- Routine and repetition ✓
- Good (friendly) relationships with adults ✓
- Rhythmic learning – being active before learning theory and taking short sensory breaks throughout the day ✓
- Feel-good learning experiences, relevant to their developmental age ✓
- Strategies and settings that work for children with ASD often work for traumatised children ✓

### What doesn't work?

- Shouting ✗
- Sarcasm ✗
- Isolation ✗
- Shaming ✗
- Pressurizing ✗
- Compensating ✗
- Reward- based behavioural management ✗
- Ignoring the impact of the past ✗

### Want to know more?

The parent who gave you this sheet has a booklet containing information and a list of resources that could help. You can also do an online search of the topics. Reliable sources are Dr. Daniel Hughes, The Child Trauma Academy, Bessel van der Kolk, Dr. Bruce Perry (who has written downloadable papers for Scholastic) and Louise Bombèr at [www.touchbase.org.uk](http://www.touchbase.org.uk)

### The following books are recommended:

*Inside I'm Hurting: Practical Strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in schools, What about me? Inclusive strategies to support pupils with attachment difficulties make it through the school day, both by Louise Bombèr (Worth Publishing)*

For information on any aspect of adoption please contact Adoption UK in Scotland on 0131 201 2488. [www.adoptionuk.org/scotland](http://www.adoptionuk.org/scotland)

# The PLACE attitude for teaching traumatised children



**A**ttachment therapist Dan Hughes talks about the therapeutic attitude needed when working with a traumatised child. It is achieved through PLACE. Parents and teachers can achieve a great deal through being Playful, Liking, Accepting, Curious, and Empathic, even in the absence of other strategies or resources.

**P**layful - A relaxed and playful environment is a more effective way of influencing a child's behaviour than rewards, sanctions or anger-based discipline. Playfulness engages and rewires children at precognitive levels and recognises their limited ability to follow instructions. Simply delighting in the child also conveys acceptance, regardless of their achievements or misdemeanours. Positive non-verbal communication such as soft eye contact and facial expressions, good touch, and welcoming body posture communicate positivity, as does maintaining a happy school environment.

**L**iking - Show the child that you like them by staying calm even when they misbehave. Do not reject the child even if they reject you, and reconnect with them quickly after absences or disciplining. Find something valuable about the child and try to like that part of them when their behaviour is challenging. Remember, the behaviour gets worse when the child is frightened or stressed. As a baby or toddler they were frequently in this state.

**A**ccepting - It's easier for our children to stay regulated and start to change if you can show you accept them and the reasons for their difficulties, while not necessarily accepting the behaviour. Reminding yourself that traumatised children often "can't do" rather than "won't do", that they are doing their best, and their behaviours are a way of communicating needs and fears can help you develop an accepting attitude. You can use accepting expressions like, 'I really like having you in my class and still it is not okay for you to hit people. Let's see if we can find a better way for you to show me what you need.'



**C**urious: Being curious rather than angry about why children act in certain ways can help them to change. You can convey curiosity by wondering out loud why the child is behaving in a certain way. Simply saying something like, "I wonder why it is so hard for you to wait your turn/queue up for lunch" etc, can help a child to stop, think and begin to make sense of their feelings and behaviours. This is usually more effective than asking directly what's bothering them. A child who has 'switched off' their feelings may not know why they are upset. They may say something trivial, or withhold the information through lack of trust. An educated guess such as, 'I wonder if you are worried about the school trip on Friday,' can also be an excellent way to open discussion, in which you can listen empathically.

**E**mpathy is the most important quality you can have when working with our children. To understand the child's needs we have to put ourselves in their shoes and convey to them that we 'get it'. For example, 'I know that these spellings are hard for you to remember', 'Your knee is really red, I bet that hurts.' Empathy allows the child to feel their feelings and encourages the release of grief, fear and rage behind emotional and behavioural problems. Try to empathise with the child before disciplining and throughout the employment of disciplinary measures. It is vital that you remain genuinely empathic, not flippant or sarcastic.



# All About Me

## My Personal Folder

My name is:

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Names of people who matter to me:

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A bit about my past:

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3 words that describe me are:

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My hobbies are:

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One thing I really like is:

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One thing I really don't like is:

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When I grow up I want to be:

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My personal care

Break-time & lunch-time



In the playground

Toileting

Getting changed

Touch

How I show my needs



What helps me learn

My strengths



Things that are hard for me



What upsets me/trauma triggers

Ideas to calm me



Topics and times that might upset me





# All About Me

## My Personal Folder

**SAMPLE**

**My name is:**

Kirsty MacKenzie

**Names of people who matter to me:**

Mum: Sarah

Dad: Gordon

Birth mum: Linda

Foster carer: Morag

Siblings: Euan & Cameron

Birth siblings: Gregor & Ellie

**A bit about my past**

I was left alone a lot

I was often hungry and cold

I was punished badly for minor things

I had to look after my siblings

I didn't get to play

I lived in six different families

**3 words that describe me are:**

Kind

Smiley

Funny

**My hobbies are:**

Football and gymnastics

**One thing I really like is:**

Most animals

**One thing I really don't like is:**

Big dogs

**When I grow up I want to be:**

A vet

## My personal care

### Break-time & lunch-time

I don't eat in crowds or if I am scared/stressed

I may need help cleaning up after lunch

### In the playground

I need to stay close to the playground supervisor

I sometimes prefer to stay indoors at breaks

### Toileting

I need reminded to go to the toilet

I wear pull-ups

### Getting changed

I need help with laces

I may feel uncomfortable undressing for PE

### Touch

I don't like being touched without warning

I need to touch everything in a new space

## How I show my needs

Chatting non-stop

Make people laugh/act the clown

Being overly affectionate

Following you around

Constantly demanding attention

Chewing my hand and rocking

## What helps me learn

Having a fidget toy

Sitting beside a focused pupil

Having frequent breaks

Sitting beside a friend

Having a photo of mum/dad handy

## My strengths

I am kind

I am friendly

I am good at football

I love music

I'm good on the computer

I love animals

## Things that are hard for me

Being away from mum/dad

Homework might be an issue

Trying new things

Joining in

Being told off in front of people

## What upsets me/trauma triggers

Being touched without warning

Being laughed at

Doors banging

Feeling hungry

Being left alone/ignored

Saying goodbye

Sarcasm

Enforced eye contact

## Ideas to calm me

Recognise anxiety behaviour and help me name it

Listen to me and help me pick a calming activity to do for a few minutes

Let me do a message or chore but not as a punishment

Stay with me and use PLACE

## Topics and times that might upset me

Mother's day

Baby photos

Circle time topics about loss

# Five things to remember about me



**1** Please try to think less about managing my behaviour and more about reducing my anxiety - reducing anxiety will lead to better behaviour. Behaviour is how I signal my needs and fears. I first experienced need when I had no language to describe it, so my behaviour is my first language. I will revert to it when I'm stressed or anxious.

**2** I learn much better when I feel safe – emotionally and physically. I need you to like me and I need to like you, otherwise I just won't learn and school will be harder for both of us. Deep down I feel I am bad and that nobody would want to care for me, so I will challenge your interest in me. Please don't get angry when I don't trust you. Use the PLACE attitude and consequence my misdemeanours - without anger! This will help me build cause and effect thinking, reduce my shame and encourage a healthy sense of guilt.

**3** I may act much younger than my years. Because difficult things happened to me when I was young, parts of my development just got stuck. So, I find it hard to get through the day without my Mum or Dad and I may need sensory reminders of them to make me feel safe. I need you to supervise me, give me boundaries, and relate to me as you would to a much younger child. With me the motto is always, "Think toddler".

**4** I'm not good with change or surprises. I need a timetable for my day, so I know what is coming next. I need you to prepare me for any changes in teacher, classroom assistant or pupils; if we are going on a school trip, to a different class or if lunch or break arrangements are going to change. If I am sent out of class for any reason, please tell me where I am going and who I will be with. If I am sent to a different teacher as a discipline, please let it always be the same teacher, where possible. If I go somewhere new, let me check out the space before we settle down to learn. Please don't leave me isolated or alone at any time.

**5** Please remember that you, me and my family are all doing our best. Don't take my behaviour personally; it may feel personal but it is not about you and it is not deliberate. Model how you want me to behave. It helps if you can say "sorry" when you get it wrong and "thank you" even when my behaviour is bad. E.g. "Thank you (name) for showing me that this is hard for you. Now let's see if we can find a better way for you to show that you need help". Finally, you may pick up on my feelings and begin to feel anxious, demoralised and deskilled yourself. Please get support if this happens. You make a real difference to children's lives, we need you to take good care of yourself. Thank you.

# Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

Every child who goes on to be adopted has suffered from an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) at some point in their young lives. ACEs can include experiences such as parental separation, household mental health difficulties, domestic abuse, household substance or alcohol misuse, experience of sexual, physical or emotional abuse, neglect and parental imprisonment (Anda RF; Felitti VJ (2003) Origins and Essence of the Study, ACE Reporter).

Each adverse experience comes with a score – and the higher the ACEs score of an individual, the more likely there is to be a long term health issue, or short-term impact on social and emotional development.

The recent Wales Adoption cohort study identified higher prevalence of significant ACE scores in the population of children adopted between June 2014 and July 2017 – 47% in comparison to 14% of the general population held ACE scores of 4+. These correlated with evidence of higher levels of peer relationship problems, conduct problems, prosocial behaviours, hyperactivity-inattention, and emotional symptoms. (Anthony and Shelton 2017)

For adoptive families, knowing the ACE score of your child, and you, can help to consider what supports may be necessary in the future. This information can also be used to help professionals involved with your child to understand the lasting impact of early traumatic experiences on children's neurological development. It is important to know that the impact of ACEs will not determine the future of the child – every child responds differently, and with the right support strategies in place a negative outcome is not inevitable.



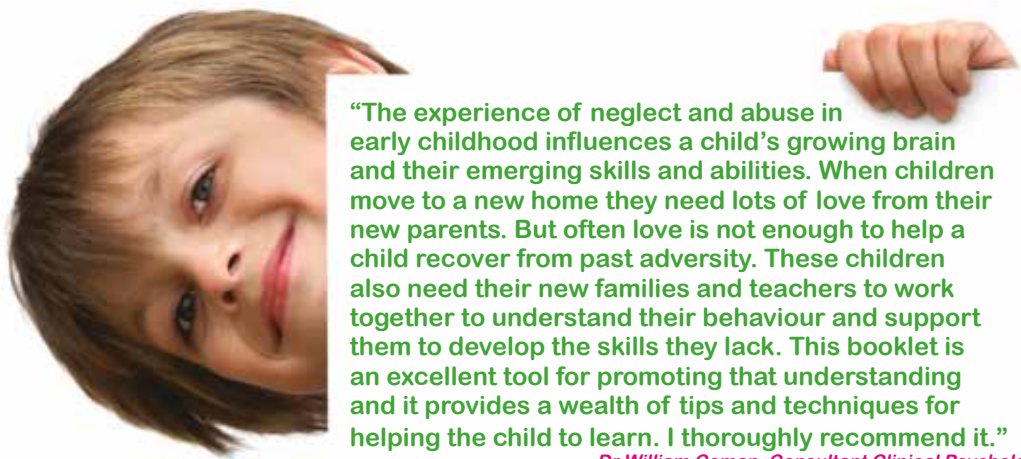
Kirsty, mother of two children, adopted her twins at the age of 7:

"From the background information we were given about our children, their ACEs score was 5 – but there were 3 questions I couldn't say definitely yes or no – I just didn't know and they were too young to remember. So their score could have been as high as 8. They are 20 on their next birthday, doing really well in spite of our rollercoaster ride through family life. For only one of them, school was such a nightmare.

Two children having more or less the same experiences – but dealt with them so differently, and each had their own ways of coping – some more socially acceptable than others! For the long term outcomes, we will just have to wait and see, but for now both are doing really well, in completely different environments".







“The experience of neglect and abuse in early childhood influences a child’s growing brain and their emerging skills and abilities. When children move to a new home they need lots of love from their new parents. But often love is not enough to help a child recover from past adversity. These children also need their new families and teachers to work together to understand their behaviour and support them to develop the skills they lack. This booklet is an excellent tool for promoting that understanding and it provides a wealth of tips and techniques for helping the child to learn. I thoroughly recommend it.”

*Dr William Coman, Consultant Clinical Psychologist*

“Great booklet - very useful for teachers who have pupils with attachment issues. Thank you!”

*Robert Heyburn, P5 teacher*

Education issues are a constant theme on Adoption UK’s helpline and in support groups across the UK.

Teachers and parents are often unaware that adopted children’s early experiences can leave them vulnerable to varying degrees of distress and difficulty at school. This booklet aims to provide insight into why these challenges might occur and guidance on how to manage key areas of difficulty to help adopted children thrive in primary school.



“Excellent. An invaluable resource for families and professionals trying to meet the needs of children with attachment difficulties. It makes such sense when working with children to understand with empathy the child or, more often than not, the behaviours with which the child is presenting. This booklet should support and empower schools and families to deliver a truly child-centred approach and really make a difference to children with attachment difficulties and trauma histories.”

*Mary Roulston, Headteacher*

“We know of many adoptive parents and foster carers who would be very pleased to have this information. Specific useful strategies make it a valuable resource for parents and teachers alike.”

*Dungannon & Armagh Family Placement Team*

“I found this a really useful, easy-to-read booklet which summed up a lot of information from various sources in one document. There is so much here that teachers need to be aware of. It is equally useful for parents, especially if they haven’t attended Adoption UK training, or they just need a refresher.”

*FC, adoptive parent*

£3.95

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for every adoptive family