

**PAC-UK**



TOGETHER WITH **AAY**  
**THE AGENCY FOR  
ADOPTION &  
PERMANENCY  
SUPPORT**

# Becoming adoption friendly schools: What can we do?

**Dr Emma Gore Langton**  
**Head of Education Service**  
**PAC-UK**

# Outline

- What do we know about adopted children's educational outcomes
- How can we support individual children?
- How can we develop adoption-friendly school systems?

# DfE (2014)

“Many of these children have experienced grief and loss and will have had traumatic experiences in their early lives. Their needs to not change overnight and they do not stop being vulnerable just because they are in a loving home. Their experiences in early life can have a lasting impact which can affect the child many years after adoption...”

# What do we know?

- In 2015, \_\_\_% of adopted and special guardianship children achieved Level 4 or above in reading, writing and maths, compared with 52% of looked after children and 80% of non-looked after children (DfE, 2016)
- In 2015, \_\_\_% of adopted and special guardianship children achieved 5+ A\*-C GCSEs compared with 14% of looked after children and 53% of non-looked after children (DfE, 2016)
- Up to \_\_\_% of adopted children have Statements/EHC Plans compared with 2% of pupil population (Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007)

- Up to \_\_\_% of adopted children attend specialist provision (Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007)
- Around \_\_\_% of adopted children have social, emotional and mental health needs (Biehal et al., 2010)
- Up to \_\_\_% of adopted children have been excluded from school, compared with 0.06% of pupil population (Adoption UK, 2014)
- \_\_\_% of adopted children require educational psychology support (Sturgess & Selwyn, 2007)

# DfE (2014)

“...We therefore believe that **teachers and schools** have a vital role to play in helping these children **emotionally, socially, and educationally**, to raise their attainment and **address their wider needs.**”

# Areas of need

- Relationships with adults
- Emotional literacy and regulation
- Relationships with peers
- Executive functioning
- Coping with change & transition

# Strategies: building relationships with adults

- Provide a key person
- Hold the child in mind & transitional objects
- Nurture and structure
- Reconnecting and repairing





# Strategies: helping children to cope with change and transitions



- Put structure into unstructured time: boring is sometimes better!
- Goodbyes are as important as hellos
- Planning and preparation



# Strategies: helping children to develop their 'air traffic controls'



- Think younger
- Lend your frontal lobe: provide a narrative
- Scaffold the activity
- Teach the child to use checklists and prompts



# Strategies: helping children to stay calm



- Safe spaces
- Time in, not time out
- Routine and predictability
- Sensory grounding



# What does it mean to be an 'adoption friendly' school?

# Research Questions

“In your experience, what are the key issues facing *adopted and special guardianship children* in school?”

“In your experience, what are the key challenges *schools* face in meeting the needs of adopted and special guardianship children?”

“Can you give us an example of how your school has...”

# Methodology

- Online survey Sept-Dec 2015
- 406 responses in total; 340 adoptive parents; 20 special guardians; 20 foster carers; 8 adopted adults; 38 teaching staff; 36 school leadership; 19 school governors; 10 adoption/fostering social workers
- England (91.13%), Scotland (2.95%), Northern Ireland (1.1%) and Wales (2.21%)

# As an adoption friendly school, we work hard to...



- (1) Identify children's needs
- (2) Prioritize relationships
- (3) Respond empathically to behaviour
- (4) Work in true partnership with parents

- (5) Share information sensitively and effectively
- (6) Reflect and protect adoptive families
- (7) Support our staff
- (8) Use our resources wisely

*We don't always get it right, so we try again.*



# (1) Identifying needs

## An adoption friendly school...

- Understands the needs commonly experienced by adoptive families
- Knows who its adopted children are
- Is confident assessing children's social and emotional needs
- Thinks of children's needs developmentally

## (2) Prioritising relationships

### An adoption friendly school...

- Provides key adults
- Supports the child and family with a team around the child
- Ensures that all staff interact with children in a validating and empathic way
- Ensures that its systems and procedures back-up the importance of relationships
- Helps adults and children to find the joy in their relationships

# (3) Responding to behaviour

## An adoption friendly school...

- Understands children's behaviour as communication
- Understands the limitations of reward/consequence systems
- Builds children's emotional literacy and emotion regulation skills
- Develops empathic behaviour management responses
- Builds staff's capacity to respond to children's strong emotions
- Builds the school's capacity to support adults with their strong emotions
- Supports adults and the system to be flexible

# (4) Partnership with parents

## An adoption friendly school...

- Understands potential barriers to partnership
- Makes space for everyone's expertise
- Gets it right from the start
- Communicates even when things are going well
- Works to recover the partnership when things are difficult
- Understands families' wider support needs and signposts them appropriately

# (5) Information Sharing

## An adoption friendly school...

- Understands the information-sharing dilemmas adoptive families face
- Understands the range of views children and young people have about their information being shared
- Has a designated teacher who proactively contacts adoptive families
- Makes explicit information sharing agreements with adoptive families
- Overcomes barriers to sharing information within school

# (6) Reflecting & protecting families



An adoption friendly school...

- Works with parents to identify curriculum hotspots & approaches sensitively
- Reflects adoptive families in its representation of families
- Prevents bullying of adopted children
- Protects adoptive families from stigma
- Safeguards children's identities
- Helps to keep young people safe online

# (7) Staff development & support

## An adoption friendly school...

- Provides training for all staff in attachment, trauma and loss
- Ensures that training leads to change in practice
- Understands secondary trauma and blocked care, and makes staff aware of these
- Commits to looking after staff well, so they can look after children well
- Develops peer support for staff
- Offers external supervision and counselling for staff as needed
- Encourages and enables staff to care for themselves

# (8) Using resources wisely

## An adoption friendly school...

- Reviews and tracks its current use of resources
- Maps its resources onto the needs of adopted children using formats such as the personal education plan
- Takes steps to ensure adoptive families feel comfortable to declare their status for pupil premium plus funding
- Understands the rules and spirit of the pupil premium plus grant
- Informs and collaborates with adoptive parents regarding its use of resources
- Monitors and reports on the impact of resources for children



# Your next step

What is your very next step on the path to becoming adoption friendly?

What resources do you have?

What help do you need?



# Adoption friendly schools are...

Rare and precious

A myth...

Ones you know when you find them

Too hard to find

Essential

Lifesavers

# Information & support



- PAC-UK Education advice line & email  
[www.pac-uk.org/education](http://www.pac-uk.org/education)
- AdoptionUK schools' membership  
[www.adoptionuk.org](http://www.adoptionuk.org)
- Your virtual school