

## **Inquiry into the educational outcomes of young people in care/from a care background**

### **Adoption UK response to request for written submissions**

#### ***About Adoption UK***

Adoption UK is the only national charity run by and for adoptive parents. The charity's aim is to provide and support a self-help network for adoptive parents to explore the unique social, emotional and developmental needs of adopted children and young people and their families. Through this network, Adoption UK also promotes effective learning practice, based on over 35 years' experience of adoptive parenting, which is integrated with current theories of trauma, attachment and development. Adoption UK has a membership of over 5,000 families.

All children who are adopted will have experienced some form of loss or trauma through being separated from their birth families. Many adopted children will have experienced further loss and trauma through their early experiences of abuse or neglect within the birth family, which may have been compounded by numerous moves within the public care system. For many children, this trauma may lead to emotional, behavioural, educational or development difficulties, which may also affect the children's abilities to form secure attachments with their new parents. Traditional parenting techniques may not work and adoptive parents may need to develop alternative parenting strategies in their role as "therapeutic parents" for traumatised children.

Adoption UK's information, advice and support services include training programmes and workshops, local support groups, online message boards, two magazines, a national helpline (0844 848 7900), a casework and advocacy service, mentoring schemes, a wide-ranging publications programme and contact networks. We also work with numerous local authorities throughout the UK under service level agreements to help them deliver their adoption support services. Our members have access to all of our services, but they are also part of a community of adopters who have made the commitment to help and support each other, with understanding and without judgement. This unique community of adopters is our most important resource.

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Adoption UK is a charity registered in England and Wales (regd charity no 326654) and in Scotland (regd charity no: SC037892). It is also a registered Adoption Support Agency (service no: 66957), regulated by Ofsted in England.

## **Adoption UK response**

### *Introduction*

While the cross-party inquiry is focused on the educational outcomes of young people in care, it rightly highlights the need also to consider the outcomes for children and young people who come “from a care background”. Nowhere is this issue more prevalent than in relation to adopted children, for whom there is often a lack of recognition of their history as former looked after children, who were taken into care due to abuse and neglect. By very definition, the levels of harm experienced by adopted children in their early lives is of such severity that it is neither safe nor possible to return them home to their birth families, hence their placement for adoption. The consequences are a population of traumatised children who have been placed for adoption and whose backgrounds/needs are not recognised by the education system, often on the basis that the very act of placing a child for adoption will be the end of their “troubles”. Nothing could be further from the truth, however, ironically, it is a fact of the life that many traumatised looked after children have essential educational services withdrawn once an adoption order is granted.

### *Background*

The trauma of abuse and neglect has a massive, long-term effect on brain and child development. While all children will take time to settle in a new educational environment, a child who has experienced moves and trauma in their early years may be much more unpredictable. In addition to moves between different homes and carers, an older child may have moved from school to school, possibly adding to the early trauma they will have already experienced. While the child may start with their worst behavior and improve once they are reassured that their teachers and parents are talking to each other and to the child, equally, s/he may behave very well as school and act out their stresses quite excessively at home.

Due to the chaotic and disrupted early childhoods that many adopted or fostered children will have had, they are often hyper vigilant (or on “permanent red alert”) towards any form of threat or change. This is understandable when one appreciates that in abusive or neglectful birth families, they will have had to develop strategies to ensure their very survival. As a result, adopted/fostered children’s “world view” is different to a child with health early development, and will take a lot of long-term nurturing and security for this to change.

Any changes at school, such as a teacher, a classroom or a routine, can be distressing for the child and the parents will need the support and understanding of their child’s school – all this in a mainstream school environment which will often be doing its best to move children towards an independence that most adopted/fostered children may not be ready for or even be able to cope with.

Adopted and fostered children may also feel guilt, and blame themselves for the break-up of their family. This can lead to low self-esteem and their resulting behaviour may be a key indication of how frightened they are feeling inside. They will need a lot of help and support from parents and teachers to overcome these feelings.

On a yet more simple level, many subjects within the school curriculum are fraught with difficulty for adopted/fostered children. Classwork on family trees, family timelines or baby pictures for instance, are obvious areas that cause distress and upset for adopted/fostered children. In addition, sex education can be an issue for those children who have experienced sexual abuse; and in PE/games/dance, removing clothes may be an issue for abused children. More generally, playing with other children may be difficult because of lack of social understanding. Similarly, books or texts on some issues will be difficult, eg, where they involve the subject or themes of loss, loneliness, death, abandonment, etc.

### *The Inquiry's questions*

As can be seen from the above, Adoption UK is concentrating its response on the educational issues as they affect adopted children, hence we have not responded to all the inquiry's questions, but rather have addressed the questions relevant to adoption.

- *Why do young people in care achieve at lower levels than their peers?*  
The primary reasons why young people in care, or those who have been adopted from care, achieve at lower levels than their peers is that the traumatising effects of abuse and neglect impact massively on their social, emotional and behavioural development. This, in turn, impacts on children and young people's educational ability, especially if no action is taken within the educational setting to acknowledge and address the effects of trauma. Often adopted children are physically and mentally developmentally delayed (and will often have a range of mental health and/or learning difficulties), yet this is given scant attention in the classroom. What is required is a fuller assessment of children's social and emotional development, at an early stage in their development, and regularly thereafter, especially where they are either in the care system or have previously been in the care system.
- *What factors have the greatest impact on the educational attainment of children in care?*  
An educational setting that understands the effects of trauma on children, and that has teachers trained and equipped to deal with issues of attachment, trauma and unhealthy child development.
- *How does the 'on the ground' experience of current policy correlate to the intentions of current/previous policy?*  
From the perspective of adopted children, current policy fails to acknowledge their needs as former looked after children. While looked after children have priority in school admissions, this is denied to adopted children who have been adopted from the care system. Similarly, in relation to additional support, via statements of educational need, adoption is all too rarely seen as factor requiring additional support.

- *What examples of best practice should be highlighted either here or abroad?*  
We have attached a useful booklet by the National Children's Bureau on educational issues for looked after children and adopted children – a useful overview.

Family Futures (based in London) carries out good educational support work with schools. Brighton and Hove Council also has an Attachment Support Service for adopted children, run by Louise Bomber.

- *Are there 'common sense', practical measures that could easily be changed to improve the current system and its outcomes?*  
For adopted children, the most important "common sense" practical measure would be to give them the same priorities that looked after children have in relation to the admissions system and educational support services.

Beyond that, it is about schools and the education system understanding the needs of looked after and adopted children and adjusting their learning frameworks to cater for their needs. There is a lot of information, publications and training available within the adoption and fostering sector which could help schools with this work. Many of the changes would benefit mainstream teaching and education, rather than having to be a specialist area for select groups of pupils.

- *Is the correct level and type of support available in schools for young people in care?*

It is variable, depending on the attitude and approach of individual schools. Primary schools tend to be able to cope better with changing their approach than secondary schools.

- *What extra support can be put in place to encourage/enable attainment for looked after children?*

Educational professionals should be trained in the issues of attachment and trauma, with the learning from this used to change current educational practices that do not meet the needs of traumatised children. In appendix 1, we have included some feedback from adoptive parents, which was gathered as part of a project run by the North London Post Permanent Placement Consortium.

## **Appendix 1**

### **North London Post Permanent Placement Consortium**

(comprising Tavistock Clinic, Great Ormond Street, Anna Freud Centre, Marlborough Family Service, Adoption UK, BAAF, Coram)

- DCSF-funded research project into CAMHS services carried out during 2007 and 2008; reported in 2009
- Adoption UK ran three focus groups looking primarily at adoptive parents' experiences of CAMHS service – but education played a big part.
- Parents who attended represented 16 families.
- Yielded rich accounts of the parents' experiences.
- Group discussions recorded verbatim and data analysed using a form of thematic analysis.

### **Summary of adoptive parents' responses from the focus groups (including some anonymous quotes)**

- Many parents expressed deep concern about the response of schools.
- Teachers' understanding of effects of early maltreatment/neglect was variable, and they were often unaware of impact this might have on learning, social and organisational skills.
- Primary schools more positive, but secondary transfer often precipitated difficulties.
- Parents frequently had to fight for additional support (including going to tribunals/seeking legal redress).

*"He was in mainstream education for a while and it became increasingly obvious that he was not coping. Staff saw his behaviour simply as naughtiness. He was constantly faced with sanctions and sent to the headmistress and punished in various ways. We kept saying, look he is autistic, this is what an autistic child does when he is upset, he screams, he rips his clothes off, he rolls around on the floor. The headmistress said, no it's challenging behaviour and it must be met with sanctions."*

- Many parents felt resources were more available to children who remained in the care system.
- Teachers ignorant of adoption issues, and unsympathetic or unwilling to listen to parents or to work with them.
- Coordinated, multi-agency response was strongly advocated.

Positive comments about particular primary schools:

*"The school that my son goes to, that we fought very hard to get him into, it's only 5 mins from our house. It's a very small school, single form entry, rare for London. The head teacher there has since moved on, was very into doing all sorts of things, and had an art therapist at the school and [he] got art therapy for two and a half years, in school, which was absolutely wonderful for [him]."*

*"The primary school was great, we had a young women TA for the first few years who was actually an external MSc student ... she was very interested in [him] ... She was very devoted to him, she was lovely. We have been very lucky with the school."*

- Transition to secondary school was frequently spoken of as a significant challenge.
- Often meant a radical change from what might have been a workable, nurturing context. The physical environment both in its larger size and greater complexity; frequent changes of room and teacher; the demands of multiple subjects; homework timetables and peer relationships; all blended together into a level of demand that many children found difficult to cope with.

*"There is a definite double standard. When my son was out of school, [he] could not cope with senior school – junior school he could cope with, nice little one to one relationship, he was alright. But senior school was a wash out almost instantly. You know there's a pupil referral type thing to rebuild the confidence and get people talking ... get the kids back to doing some studying – but you could only go it you were fostered. The fact that that had exactly the same problems and needs ... oh no."*

- Some schools helped in the process of identifying difficulties and pushed for the involvement of an educational psychologist or for a referral to the local CAMHS.
- Others, despite the child's behaviour being out of the normal range, failed to acknowledge this in a helpful way, compounding the delay in children and their adoptive parents reaching the help that they so desperately needed.
- In some instances parents were neither involved nor consulted, and this inevitably led to difficulties. Being left out of this critical step either impacted on the relationship between home and school, making it less constructive, or served to taint the connection with CAMHS in some way.

*"Within about a month of starting school she was fast-tracked, statemented for behavioural difficulties, already a child's parent had threatened to go to the press because my child had attacked another kid in the class, so she was statemented for emotional difficulties."*

- Some parents got a reputation within the school for being challenging and argumentative, or for interfering.

*"We had a run in with the school, actually the school did very well for the first year. C was not ready for school, so if you got him to the gate, he would either be over the gate or up a tree, or in the front door and out of the back, and I used to say to the teacher, think three. I got accused of interfering with the class, with the class teacher. ... We had some support from the school despite the fact that I used to drive them mad. They used to worry about our safety."*

- Parents made considerable efforts to share information with teachers in the hope that more sensitive responses would prevail.
- They were usually willing to share what they knew about their child's history and the impact this had had on their development, behaviour and emotional functioning.
- There was a measure of frustration in this information not being taken into account.

- There was a plea for greater training in educational issues for adopted children to be integral to teacher training, and for inset days to focus on it so that pupils [and their families] were handled more sensitively.
- Finding a single teacher who was understanding and prepared to work alongside a parent could make a big difference.

*"One of the best, maybe THE, thing, that has made a real difference to my son this year is that his class teacher is also the SENCO and actually she is a really good SENCO. She understands, since I gave her some of the paperwork on his background; understands where he comes from. She has given me her school email address, so that I can send her emails about what has happened at home. She can send me emails."*