

**Impact Evaluation  
for  
Family Action  
Executive Summary**

**East Midlands Adoption Support  
Service (EMASS)**

**February 2018**

## Executive Summary

The East Midlands Adoption Support Service is a **post-adoption** service available to adoptive families and Special Guardians going through crisis after adoption placement or after a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). Often, the children in EMASS cases have suffered early trauma, neglect, or abuse, prior to their adoption placement. EMASS began delivering support to families in January 2017 and is delivered by Family Action, a national charity that has provided support to children and families for almost 150 years.

Envoy Partnership conducted research from August to November 2017 about the impact and efficacy of the EMASS model across three areas of focus:

- Children's education and learning engagement
- Parental knowledge and confidence to meet children's attachment needs
- Knowledge of school staff to meet the needs of adopted or cared for children

The service is delivered primarily in Lincolnshire, where there is currently a lack of available resource for statutory and non-statutory provision for post-adoption support, compared to higher than anticipated levels of need. There are also a small number of cases in the East Midlands outside of Lincolnshire. Adoptive families and those with SGOs are primarily referred to EMASS through Lincolnshire County Council (LCC) Post Adoption Support (PAS) team, LCC/non-LCC Children's Services, and local schools.

EMASS services focus on introducing attachment theory and attachment-based strategies. 'Attachment' in this context refers to 'the bond and lasting relationships that young children form with adults', and especially a sense of security, trust, stability, and 'safety when in the company of a particular adult' (Wittmer, 2011)<sup>1</sup>.

### Key findings

From January to November 2017, EMASS received 81 referrals, of which 77 proceeded to case work. EMASS activities include i) highly personalised, tailored support and training for adoptive parents or guardians – often at home, ii) one-to-one sessions with adopted or cared for children, at school or at home, iii) training and process support for school teachers and staff, professionals, and support workers and iv) online resources. The importance of the areas of work – with children, parents/carers, and school practices – is that they work best as interactive components, giving flexibility to tailor activities to each family's needs and complexity level.

EMASS' work has helped adoptive families to better cope with and manage challenging behaviours and emotions of adopted children, including: rage or anger, ambivalence or avoidance, hyper-anxiety, controlling tendencies, separation anxiety, low self-esteem, depression and dark feelings, self-harm, aggression, and either hyper-vigilance, or no boundaries with strangers.

EMASS support has helped adoptive families and school teachers build a more stable, tailored routine around adopted or cared for children. This has helped children manage homework, interaction with teachers and other children, and to practice self-modulation of behaviours e.g. using techniques to de-escalate from certain situations.

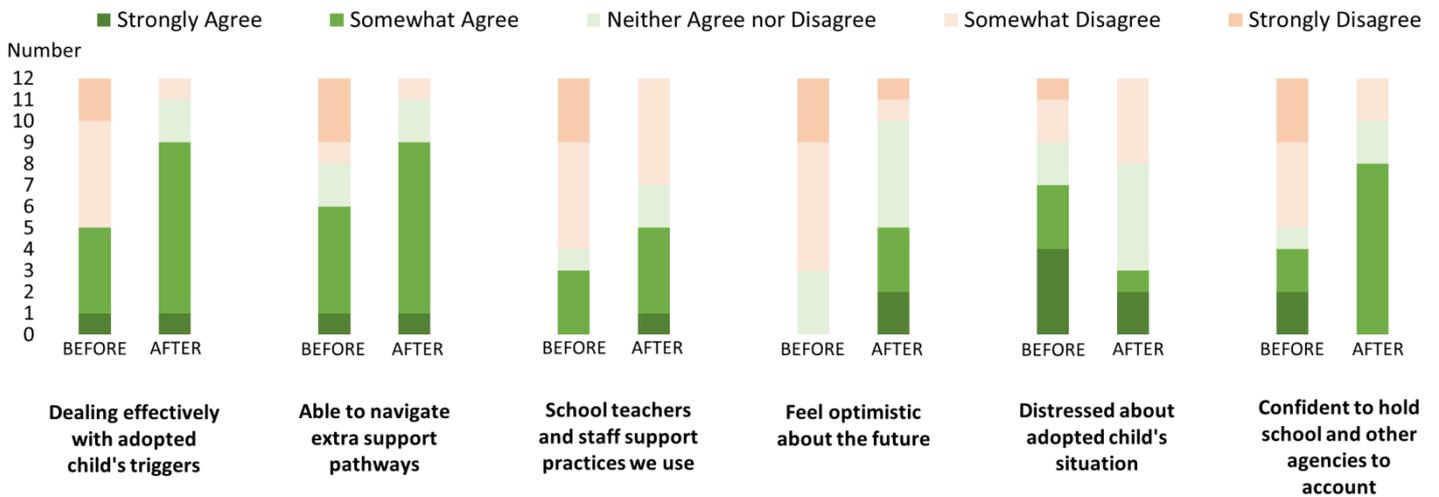
There have been positive outcomes in terms of improved wellbeing, safety, and learning engagement for many adopted children. There have also been positive impacts on parents' sense of optimism, coping, and relief from

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<sup>1</sup> Wittmer, D. (2011) *Attachment. What works?* CSEFEL, Vanderbilt University

feelings of extreme distress, as illustrated in Chart A – in some cases avoiding break-up of adoptive couples, and reducing avoidable breakdown of the adoption placement.

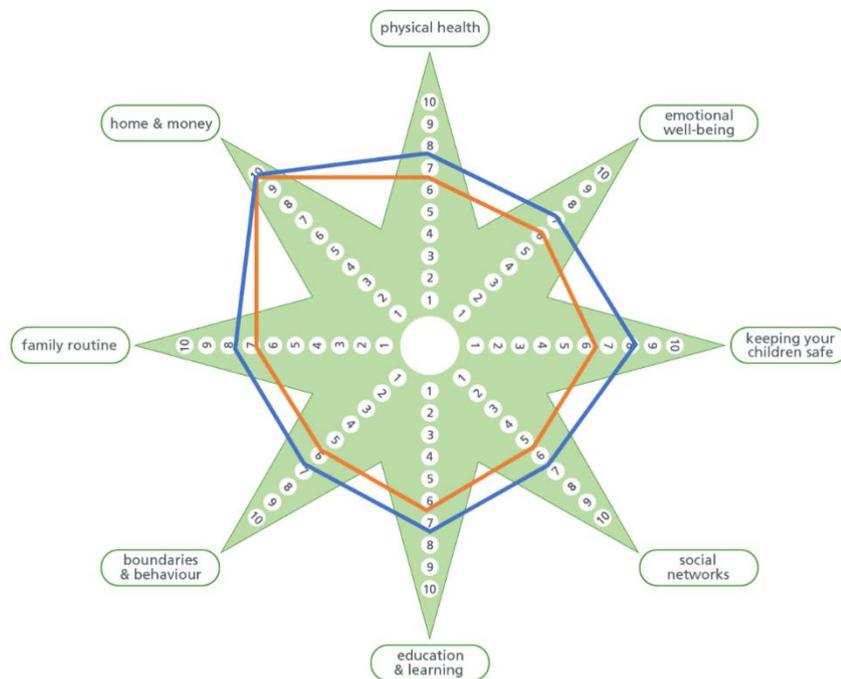
**Chart A.** Parent survey responses about key parent outcomes: pre v post EMASS service provision (N=12)



Through EMASS' support work, adoptive parents feel more equipped and confident, drawing on new knowledge, techniques and practices around attachment theory. Emotional support (often on a deeply personal level), advocacy support, feeling listened to, and feeling less alone or isolated, are all at the heart of how outcomes are achieved through EMASS, and how adoptive parents become motivated to continue with new approaches.

There is further reinforcement of the findings when assessing the project's 'Family Star' scores (Chart B) - a tool developed by Triangle Consulting (*Family Star User Guide, 2013*) covering eight support issues. These are recorded by EMASS at the start and towards the close of the cases with the whole family, and the resultant Star Chart helps inform action planning for the family.

**Chart B.** Recorded change in Family Star outcomes, N=39 (from cases so far that have had follow-up scores)



Family Star™ (2nd Edition) © Triangle Consulting Social Enterprise Ltd  
 Authors: Sara Burns and Joy MacKeith  
 www.outcomesstar.org.uk

— After  
 — Before

Chart B has filtered out families who had a starting score of over 7 as they therefore had relatively low need for support on those issues. Improvements in the scores range from c.13% to 27%, with largest improvements for keeping a family routine and keeping children safe.

Parents and carers report that through receiving EMASS support, their children display calmer behaviours, and have better engagement with learning. This was corroborated by interviews with school teachers and through a quantitative survey with a sample of case families. These impacts help to improve and stabilise family relationships at home, and improve learning-readiness and engagement at school.

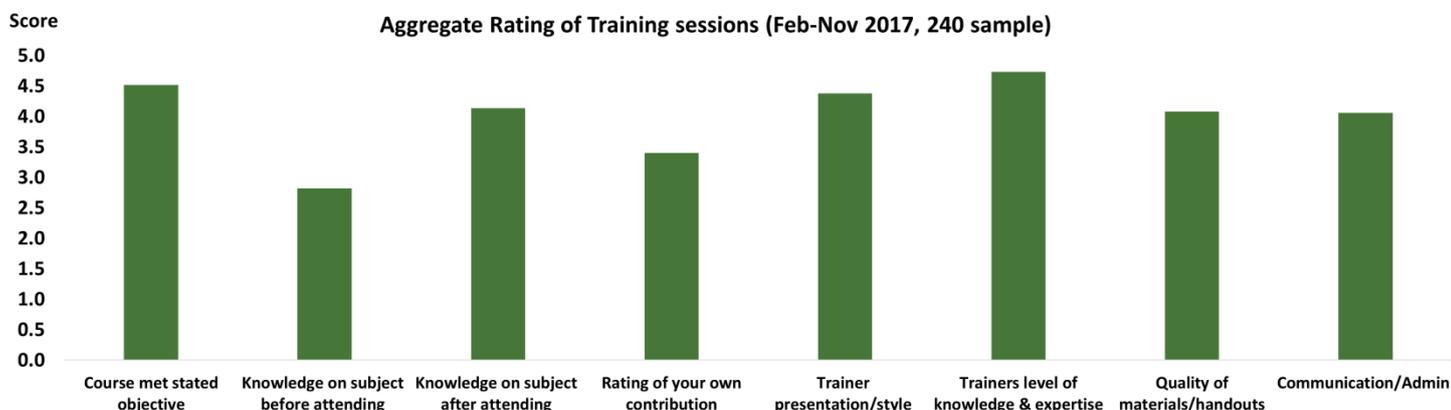
However, some cases are too severe or critical, and may require escalation – for example, placement termination, moving school, or referral to social services may be the best outcome for the adopted child and parents/carers, because of the level of need. Some issues may recur, or children may have new triggers in future, and some issues get worse before getting better, which may lead to re-referral back to EMASS.

### Findings – schools, professionals, and statutory services

22 schools hosted ‘in-house’ training sessions to November 2017, and across the year professionals from around 175 schools accessed EMASS general professional training courses i.e. not hosted ‘in-house’. Staff from 90 schools received support over 2017 during direct case work with adopted children in school.

In terms of training feedback, illustrated in Chart C below, professional knowledge about attachment-based approaches improved, and teachers and professionals we interviewed reported they were better able to identify counter-productive practices that would otherwise be used as conventional behavioural approaches. One area of potential opportunity appears to be to update the training to include interactive exercises and ‘live’ examples.

**Chart C.** Training evaluation feedback from professionals, N=240 (maximum score 5)



Teachers and adoptive parents felt that in the long-term, through advocacy and training, and building dialogue between adoptive parents and the school, that there are improvements in i) the quality of teaching practices and staff knowledge to tailor attachment-based nurturing approaches for adopted children, and ii) accountability about best ways to use Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding.

Furthermore, without EMASS, the PAS team reported it would be harder to cope sustainably in the short term with the sheer level of need, and this would impinge on the ability to reach more families in crisis. EMASS’ achievements are reported to reduce *avoidable* requirement for statutory crisis intervention from social services and PAS, helping to reduce the avoidable risk of costly placement breakdown (e.g. care costs) as well as reduce the risk of school expulsion costs. In this sense, LCC are effectively tapping into EMASS capacity, as there is otherwise a clear lack of

available resources for these families where it is most needed: direct support at home, and in school settings. Further investment is necessary to ensure that:

- statutory agencies' obligations are met;
- the high level of current need is met for adoptive families in crisis;
- awareness continues to be raised amongst parents/carers and professionals and practice using attachment theory improve as a result
- the potential fiscal and emotional costs of placement breakdowns or family breakdowns are avoided.

### **EMASS - Service strengths**

- EMASS workers form trust quickly with adoptive families, with all children included in the process, providing personal emotional support, coaching/mentoring, and can be confided in as independent of other agendas.
- EMASS workers are empathetic, personal, and enable children and parents to be comfortable in their own skin.
- There is honest and straightforward communication between parents/carers and support workers; no ambiguity or parents needing to read between the lines
- EMASS workers make parents and children feel respected and recognised for their strengths/successes, and take an appreciative approach.
- Average case length is approximately 18 weeks, and parents in general reported that initial meetings and home visits were arranged within a week with two different adoptive couples commenting that the timeliness of this *was unheard of in statutory services*. This made families feel valued.
- Parents and children feel EMASS workers will help to make sure that progress happens in the work of other agencies, and make it clear to those agencies and others when an approach is not good enough or when decisions and feedback from other agencies - or the school - are not optimal.

### **Limitations and lessons learned**

- Some cases are too severe, and require EMASS support to escalate to placement termination or moving school or referral to CAMHS or care services
- EMASS activities are a culture change intervention for schools – and the pace of change in outcomes for children can depend on school leaders' mind-sets and tenure.
- There are potential capacity issues with the service, as seen by the inability to spread support across the East Midlands more widely, because of high demand in Lincolnshire.
- Additional capacity and resource is needed for future relationship management and feedback-sharing with referrers and schools that have received EMASS training.
- One unintended consequence of success is that some agencies use EMASS to continue providing support even if there is a need for EMASS to step down or close cases, owing to other agencies own limited capacity.