Section 3: EMASS Toolkit

Presenting a Sensitive Curriculum

A guide for schools

Produced by Family Action’s East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS)



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Why we should be sensitive with pupils

Pupils who have been adopted or cared for by a number of family members or the local authority are likely to have suffered trauma and loss. This makes them vulnerable to distress, anxiety, attachment difficulties and the associated social and emotional issues.

These children may struggle to learn as quickly as their peers, and may have difficulty forming positive relationships with adults and peers.

As professionals, we should be trying to minimise the further exposure of these children to emotional distress. Being thoughtful about what we cover in the curriculum and how we address potentially sensitive topics will protect these pupils from the risk of further harm.

How we know what may cause distress and anxiety

Research tells us that adopted children and those in care or formerly looked after often have difficulties in school. Children themselves tell us that they want teachers to understand that:

* each adopted child has a unique story
* issues they face do not go away just because they are adopted
* they also want to be treated like normal children.

*‘I definitely wasn’t trying to be deliberately difficult, I just couldn’t help it.’*

[www.coramlifeeducation.org.uk/adoptables](https://www.coramlifeeducation.org.uk/adoptables/)

Adopters have also highlighted some of the difficulties their children face.

*Children were bullied in schools because of their adoptive status. Teachers need to be better informed about adoption, the risks of bullying and to be more aware of the impact of activities which focus on the family and the possible impact of specific teaching on subjects such as maltreatment and attachment theory.’*

(Beyond the Adoption Order, Selwyn et al, DfE 2014)

A survey of adopters (Adopted Children’s Experience of School 2014 Adoption UK Survey) found that:

* 80% of adoptive parents said their child needs more support
* 59% of adoptive parents said their child was always trying to catch up at school
* 64% of adoptive parents said that teenage years are, or were, the most difficult time for their child at school
* 75% of parents said their child’s experience of neglect/abuse in early life has affected their schooling

Topics and school situations that often present difficulties for adopted and formerly looked-after pupils

Elements of the curriculum can stir painful memories and feelings in children who have experienced trauma and loss.

For adopted children and those being cared for under SGOs we know they are very likely to be at risk from further distress due to their histories.

As adults we are able to minimise the risk of harm to these pupils by simply being sensitive to their needs. Topics and situations that may cause difficulties include:

* identity work and family trees
* family festivities and anniversaries (birthdays, Mother’s day, Christmas, Chinese New year, Rakhri day etc)
* sex education
* PHSE discussions about drugs, alcohol, substance misuse, mental health and domestic abuse
* chemistry labs (equipment/smells)
* genetics and inheritance
* certain topics or themes of loss, separation from families in history, geography or English lessons
* food technology/lunchtimes/break times (if children have experienced extreme neglect and lack of food)
* PE (eg getting changed with others; some children may have scarring)
* physical games involving contact
* topics addressing children’s welfare (eg Children in Need or NSPCC assemblies can touch very personally on children’s experiences).

Children and young people themselves may not even understand that they have certain ‘trauma triggers’. If abuse occurs before the age of conscious recollection, trauma is still stored subconsciously in the body and brain. If children’s trauma is triggered they may then automatically respond by going into fight, flight, freeze, friend or flop mode. (See also the ‘Attachment’ section of the EMASS Toolkit.)

Some children may also continue to have planned contact arrangements with birth family members. Contact may be direct or indirect but it is often a point of tension for children and young people and can cause them to be sad, distressed or angry.

Sensitivity to what may be happening outside of school for these children is equally important.

How to support pupils who are distressed

In 2013 the DfE introduced Pupil Premium Plus for looked-after and previously looked-after children. In doing this, the DfE acknowledged the enduring impact of trauma and loss in children’s lives and the key role of schools in supporting children who have had a difficult start in life. Pupil Premium Plus is currently £1,900 per child per year. It is expected to rise to £2,300 in 2018/19. The DfE has said that it intends the funding to be spent on:

*‘...helping adopted children emotionally, socially and educationally by providing specific support to raise their attainment and address their wider needs.’*

The focus on children’s social and emotional and wider needs is in contrast to the Pupil Premium for children eligible for free school meals, which is focused on closing the attainment gap. (<http://www.pac-uk.org/education/> )

By taking a few straightforward steps pupils can be protected from further hurt which in turn will help them feel secure and then learn more at school.

Pupils need to be given time, space and attention from a calm, trusted adult.

* Give them a ‘task’ to enable them to leave the classroom and find their support person without feeling singled out.
* They need to hear the message that they are safe.
* They need to feel listened to and understood.
* Help them to regulate their breathing.
* Take them for a walk.

Feeling different can be a negative experience for children and anything educators can do to minimise those feelings will be a positive force in building self-esteem and confidence over time.

Reducing stigma for a child and making it easy for them to access support outside the classroom by giving them a task can be very effective in avoiding shame and harm.

Once with a secure adult a range of child-led activities to help them calm and regulate their emotions can be used. Teachers and support staff in schools can help by having early conversations with parents, carers and pupils.

Having an idea about what may be challenging in the curriculum or in terms of the wider school environment means that you can plan to give support to pupils when and how they need it.

Where to go for further information and support

The Adoptables Schools Toolkit  
Toolkit and three films about children’s experience in school  
[www.coramlifeeducation.org.uk/adoptables/](http://www.coramlifeeducation.org.uk/adoptables/)

Adoption UK  
General information on adoption plus special page for Educational resources  
[www.adoptionuk.org/resources/education-resources](http://www.adoptionuk.org/resources/education-resources)

Attachment Aware Schools  
Website which explains emotional coaching and reports on development of attachment aware schools   
[www.attachmentawareschools.com/](http://www.attachmentawareschools.com/)

Inner World  
PowerPoint presentation about fight, flight, freeze, submit (friend) h [www.innerworldwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Survival-In-School-PDF.pdf](http://www.innerworldwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Survival-In-School-PDF.pdf)   
[www.innerworldwork.co.uk/?page\_id=45](http://www.innerworldwork.co.uk/?page_id=45)

Activities to help children to regulate their feelings  
[www.innerworldwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Whole-Class-Happy-Pack.pdf](http://www.innerworldwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Whole-Class-Happy-Pack.pdf)

Coram/BAAF case studies  
<http://corambaaf.org.uk/webfm_send/3879>

PAC-UK information flyer   
[www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/PAC-UK-Education-Service-Pupil-Premium-Plus-Flyer.pdf](http://www.pac-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/PAC-UK-Education-Service-Pupil-Premium-Plus-Flyer.pdf)

Adopted children and issues in education  
Adopted children can find their progress in school hampered long after placement in a loving family. Dr Emma Gore Langton looks at the ways adoptive parents can help their child at school, and the measures they can ask schools to take. www.goodschoolsguide.co.uk%2Fspecial-educational-needs%2Fadoption%2Fschool-issues&usg=AOvVaw1g2Crvfq29utyIUoNgRKR7

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| About us  Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families and brighter lives by delivering innovative and effective services and support that reaches out to many of the UK’s most vulnerable people. We seek to empower people and communities to address their issues and challenges through practical, financial and emotional help.  Our East Midlands Adoption Support Service (EMASS) was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) until March 2018. This document forms part of the EMASS Toolkit, a set of resources produced to support schools that have taken part in the project.  DfE 2955 - Funded by**Training and consultancy**  Family Action’s Training and Consultancy Service can offer a wide range of training workshops for schools and educational establishments, including all the issues covered in the EMASS Toolkit. To book a workshop or inset training day contact:  Family Action, Training and Consultancy  55 Stevens Avenue Bartley Green Birmingham B32 3SD  Email: [TandC@family-action.org.uk](mailto:TandC@family-action.org.uk) or [Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk](mailto:Joy.broadhurst@family-action.org.uk)  Tel: 020 3640 2303  Visit: [www.family-action.org.uk/training](http://www.family-action.org.uk/training)  *Disclaimer: This document includes links to websites and resources used by those involved in the EMASS project. External links were reviewed in February 2018 when this document was produced; however, we are not responsible for the changing content of external websites over time.*  *Last updated 1.3.18* |