Section 7: EMASS Toolkit

Transitions

A guide for schools

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



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What transitions may affect children who are adopted or living with Special Guardians?

All children experience transitions during their school careers. The most evident of these is the transition from primary to secondary school, which has been recognised as an important phase where preparation and support can give pupils a positive start. However, there are multiple other points of transition within educational settings that can affect pupils in different ways:

Physical transitions

* Moving from classroom to classroom during a school day
* Moving to the playground/dining hall/assembly hall/common room
* Beginning and end of the school day – coming to school and going home
* Change of food and eating habits – going to the dining hall
* Changing clothes for PE
* Timetable changes – especially around exam times

Psychological transitions

* Change of teacher (eg daily with subject teacher/supply teacher or annually with new form/class teacher)
* Change from subject to subject
* Change from work to play
* Change of students to work with
* Changing friendship groups

Constancy and relationship

Due to early adverse childhood experiences with their own parents or caregivers (attachment figures), children who have been taken into care and later adopted or made subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO), may have particular difficulties in developing trusting relationships.

They may mistrust others and see them as a threat, not trust that their needs will be met consistently or feel that no-one will meet their needs so they will have to do so themselves.

Children may have coped with their class teacher providing a substitute ‘attachment figure’ in primary school. While form tutors may bridge this in secondary school, some children will still struggle to adapt to being taught by, and having to form new relationships with, multiple teachers and support staff, as well as trying to relate to other pupils.

Why are these children particularly affected by transitions?

Children in adoptive families and those living with Special Guardians may have additional needs due to:

* previous experience of multiple separation
* difficulties in forming relationships
* feeling ‘unsafe’ and experiencing change and novelty as a threat
* feeling overwhelmed by sensory input in large school
* reduced or delayed development of ‘executive functioning’ of the brain due to prior abuse which impacts on their ability to focus their attention, plan and control impulse; this in turn will lead to:

inability to concentrate

distractibility

lack of organisation

memory problems

lack of cause and effect thinking

impulsive behaviour.

**How to help and support these children in school settings**

Moving schools

Strategies schools can use to help pupils moving schools include:

* giving them time to get to know the new school, the school environment, teachers and pupils
* allocating a key person for them to go to (eg person to meet and greet the child or ‘check in’ with at various points in the school day)
* rehearsing or role-playing different situations (eg what to do if they get lost, how to ask for help if they have an accident, what happens in school assemblies, changing for PE)
* using a DVD by Year 7 pupils in the Summer term to present to feeder schools
* adopting a mentoring/buddy scheme
* having trained activity leaders (older pupils) to organise break-time activities for younger pupils
* organising summer camps to allow new pupils to get to know the school
* developing a ‘Student Passport’ document (eg what staff need to know about me)
* having ‘Bridging Teachers’ (specialist staff working with Years 6 and 7 across primary and secondary schools)
* having ‘Bridging Subjects’ (where teachers in Years 6 and 7 carry through topics)
* using teacher photos/profiles for students
* allowing children to carry ‘transitional objects’ or sensory reminders with them as a link to home (eg a tissue with mum’s perfume, tiny toy or object)
* using visual timetables in the classroom
* having safe spaces for children to go to when feeling anxious or ‘disregulated’ (unable to control their emotions).

Some secondary schools have also started to identify pupils who may be particularly vulnerable in their feeder schools. They then ensure that they have handover information specific to the pupil and arrange a meeting with them, their teacher and parents or carers to get to know the child.

These pupils have a separate induction and some of them who may be felt to be in need of further nurture are put together in one class, from which they are gradually integrated into other tutor groups over the course of the first two terms.

Daily transitions

Some school environments are problematic for these children as they are more likely to have sensory issues. The environment at school may be so over-stimulating that it leaves children in a constant state of alarm or alert. This again is due to having lived in unpredictable and sometimes dangerous environments.

Children who have experienced trauma need time to check out new environments within school so that they feel safe and ready to learn. Key adults can assist by helping children become familiar with the school entry system and checking ‘hidden’ areas in classrooms, cloakrooms and corridors to enable them to relax.

In classrooms, a child’s seating position is also key and should be discussed with the child or young person. They may prefer to be near the teacher and this can help the teacher to notice and reassure them when necessary. However, some children may wish to have their backs to a wall where there is no-one behind them to make them feel unsafe and where they can see the door and who is coming in.

If a child works well with a particular friend, then this can be used positively, but they should not be threatened with being moved as a punishment for misbehaving as this is likely to trigger anxiety and insecurity in the child, leading them to misbehave even more.

Unstructured times

While most children cope well with unstructured times (break-times, going home time), some children who have experienced separation, loss and trauma will find these periods very difficult to manage. Schools can try a variety of strategies to give more routine and structure without singling out the child as being naughty or different, for instance:

* Vulnerable students can be given ‘tasks’ to allow more time for transition between classrooms.
* Peer mentors can help children who have difficulty with planning/organisation.
* Visual cues may be useful, such as coloured lines/school décor to guide pupils between classrooms and different subject areas (similar to those used in many hospitals).
* A staffed nurture room for inclusion can be helpful when pupils are feeling the need for support.
* Some schools have a friendship bench in the playground (children sit on it to show they need a friend). Remember that this can be stigmatising and pupils with insecurities may not want to be ‘singled out’.
* Older pupils can act as ‘buddies’ or to structure play for younger pupils.
* ‘Wind’ down time at the beginning and end of lessons can help these children.
* Mindfulness sessions for students can also be helpful.
* Some schools have a member of staff consistently at school gates to meet and greet pupils and to say farewell at the end of the day.

Each school is likely to have different ways to incorporate these ideas into their own environment and may need to adapt strategies based on the age and culture of pupils.

Some of the principles which can be applied to make ALL children feel secure can be adapted from the Secure Base Model (see below), which helps children feel protected, valued and secure within their school community.

Secure Base concepts

* **AVAILABILITY:** helping the child to trust *‘I matter, I am safe.’ ‘I can explore and return for help.’ ‘Other people can be trusted.’*
* **SENSITIVITY:** helping the child to manage feelings and behaviour *‘My feelings make sense and can be managed.’ ‘Other people have thoughts and feelings.’*
* **ACCEPTANCE:** building the child’s self esteem *‘I am accepted and valued for who I am.’ ‘I do not have to be perfect.’*
* **CO-OPERATION:** helping the child to feel effective and be co-operative *‘I can make things happen within safe limits.’ ‘I can compromise and co-operate.’*
* **SCHOOL MEMBERSHIP:** helping the child to belong *‘I belong here and am a valued part of the school community.’*

(Adapted from the Secure Base Model, Schofield and Beek UEA)

Where to go for further information and support

The Transition from Primary to Secondary School (TaMHS and Young Minds)  
<https://youngminds.org.uk/resources/tools-and-toolkits/transitions>

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

A range of attachment resources  
[www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/resources-and-bibliography/](http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/education/research/attachment-aware-schools/resources-and-bibliography/)

Roots of Empathy  
[www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org)

Secure Base Model

[www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase](http://www.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase)

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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 13.3.18* |