**Supporting Adopted Children and Young People in Education**

Children who are care-experienced, including adopted children, have often had poor early experiences and may have suffered developmental trauma as a result. This can sometimes mean that they struggle throughout the education system.

Do you see some of the behaviours below from the children and young people in your classroom?

* *Eagerness to please (both adults and children)*
* *Hyper vigilance/hyper alert/watchful/very aware of their surroundings*
* *Always want to be first to answer in class*
* *Always needing to be right*
* *Lacks confidence*
* *Low self-esteem/self-worth*
* *unable or unwilling to speak out*
* *Sensory issues*
* *Stealing – this may be food in particular*
* *Need to be in control of most situations*
* *Poor self-control*
* *Dysregulation*
* *Behaves in a way that is younger than their chronological age*

Understanding the root of these behaviours can help us to respond in the most appropriate way. Poor early experiences can affect the way a child or young

person perceives themselves and the world around them. When you understand that they are operating from background of trauma and that they are unable to control many of their behaviours without the appropriate support, this can inform the approach and strategies that are applied to their learning.

**Here are some things to consider:**

For children who have experienced broken attachments or early trauma, their distrust toward adults can only be reshaped through steady, positive interactions. Stability, routine, and predictability are essential. Building trust requires patience and understanding, but strong, healthy relationships are central to everything we strive to achieve for the children and young people we work with.

Children who missed out on essential early nurturing in a safe environment may function at a significantly lower emotional maturity level. When engaging with them, try to recognise their emotional age rather than their chronological age. This understanding can make learning more effective for everyone involved.

**The following strategies can support the learning environment for a child or young person who has experienced developmental trauma.**

* Always start the day with a positive greeting. This sets the tone for the day and lets the child or young person know that you are pleased to see them. This is so important for a child with low self-worth and self-esteem
* Have a clear structure / routine to the day. All children and young people benefit from knowing what is happening next but a child who is hyper alert will be able to settle more easily if they know that there are no surprises (or perceived threats) happening.
* Where possible, prepare the child for any changes to their normal routine e.g. change in venue, change in staff, their “contacts” being unavailable.
* Offer specific encouragement, such as saying, “I can see you put a lot of effort into that task.” General praise like “good girl” or “good boy” often lacks impact, while specific feedback shows that you genuinely noticed their effort, even if they didn’t fully complete the task.
* Give children a way to let you know that they are struggling e.g. engage a couple of their teachers as “contacts” or perhaps have a “code” that will communicate that they need extra support.
* Be aware that special events, guest speakers or particular topics or celebrations may trigger unexpected emotions. These include but are not limited to; Mother’s/Father’s Day, birthdays, Christmas, family trees, all about me. The best approach is always to have discussions with the parents/carers in advance. They will be able to guide you as to what may or may not be a trigger for their child.
* Rather than giving “time-out” when a child is dysregulated, consider “time in” instead. For a child who has experienced trauma or disrupted attachments, being unable to regulate their emotions is common. Time out feels like a punishment for something they are unable to control. Removing them from the classroom can increase their sense of shame and reinforce their low self-worth and self-esteem.
* If there has been a rupture in the relationship, reconnection is key to repairing this. Try to ensure that the repair takes place before the end of the school day. If a child takes their shame and negative emotions home, they will only grow until they return. It may even stop them wanting to attend the next day.
* Acknowledge that you know they are finding things difficult and make sure they know that you are there to support them. At home their safe base is their parents/carers. Therefore, if they are to feel safe and secure at school, they must know they have supportive adults around them.
* Try to avoid asking the young person how they feel / why they did something. Often, they will not know or cannot verbalise this. Instead, be “curious”. Help the child by verbalising their feelings for them - Use *“I wonder….”* For example*, “I wonder if you are feeling a little anxious about*

*going on the bus for the school trip*. *Why don’t we chat through what the journey might look like and who you will be sitting beside. I will be with you the whole time to make sure you are ok.”* Or “*I wonder if you ran out of the classroom because you felt scared about something. I understand that you have big feelings just now, but I want to help you feel better. We can figure it out together*.” If you are wrong, they will almost always tell you, but you may be putting words to their big feelings that they simply cannot find.

* Be aware that transitions can be difficult for children and young people who have experienced developmental trauma. The school day is full of transitions; home to school, classroom to playground, classroom to gym hall, classroom to dining hall. Ensure that strategies are put in place to support children with these transitions. E.g. have a trusted adult present, give them a “job” to do during the walk to the gym hall.
* Encourage the child to recognise the feelings of others. For example, *“I wonder how it made John feel when you hit him? I imagine he might be quite sad. Perhaps there’s something we can do to make him feel better”.*

Remember, parents are the experts in their child’s behaviour. Use their knowledge and experience to make the school environment as supportive as possible for their child. They are likely to have had input from therapeutic services and social workers.

Also, don’t dismiss a parent’s concerns or requests for support if they are describing behaviours from home that you do not see within the school environment. Often, children and young people who have experienced developmental trauma, spend the whole school day trying to hold it together, only to release all their pent-up emotions when they get home. This can be because they feel safe to “let go” when they are at home in their “safe space with their safe person”. This can be extremely challenging for parents and putting robust supports in place within the school to ensure that the child or young person feels safe and secure can alleviate these pressures at home.

Poor early experiences can impact the development of the neural pathways in the brain. This may mean that the part of the child’s brain which is most active, within the school environment, is the part which perceives threat and responds by activating the “fight or flight mode”. Children are unable to learn unless they feel safe and secure so this must be the priority if children are to fully access their education.