

Bridging the gap: giving adopted children an equal chance in school

Introduction and background

Schools in England are educating more than 42,500 children known to have left care as a result of an Adoption Order, a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangements Order. The Department for Education believes that this is a huge under-estimate of the true numbers. These children have all suffered the loss of their first family. Most have been removed into care because of abuse or neglect. The impact of repeated traumatic experiences, disrupted attachments, and life-changing transitions from home to home persist even when a child settles with a permanent family.

Adopted children in the UK are falling dramatically behind their peers academically and are also more likely to have emotional, social and mental health difficulties.

This report from Adoption UK examines some of the challenges which adopted children and young people face in school. It identifies 4 types of gap which exist between these young people and their peers and makes recommendations as to how these gaps might be bridged. The report is based on a 2018 survey of more than 2,000 adoptive parents and almost 2,000 adopted young people.

Key findings

The wellbeing crisis

- There is clear research that children and young people with better wellbeing are likely to achieve academically, make more progress in primary school and be more engaged in secondary school. During the secondary school years, emotional wellbeing increases in importance as a factor in attainment, while demographic and other factors decrease.
- Despite this evidence, the current picture of mental health and wellbeing among children and young people in the UK is an alarming one. Research published by the National Union of Teachers in 2015 shows that high pressure from tests and exams, feeling like a 'failure' at a young age, and the increased demands of the curriculum are causing rising levels of school anxiety among children and creating additional stress for families. In a survey carried out by YoungMinds in 2017, 82 per cent of teachers said that they felt that focus on exams was disproportionate to the overall wellbeing of their students.
- Children who are looked after or previously looked after are more likely than others to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties. This may include difficulties managing strong feelings, difficulties forming relationships, and problems with social skills, and can be further complicated by the effects of foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, sensory processing difficulties and poor executive functioning skills.
- Almost half of adopted children have a recognised special educational need or disability and 45 per cent of these children have social, emotional and mental health needs as their primary area of need.
- Almost 70 per cent of all adoptive parents feel that their child's progress in learning is affected by problems with their emotional wellbeing in school. This rises to three quarters of children of secondary school age.

- Seventy-nine per cent of the children surveyed felt routinely 'worried and confused' at school. Two thirds said they felt that they felt bullied at school for being adopted.

The understanding gap

- Many schools lack a full understanding of how early childhood trauma can impact a child. Such an understanding is key to meeting the needs of looked-after children in schools.
- The survey shows that neither parents nor adopted children have confidence that the education professionals in their schools are equipped to support their specific needs. Less than a quarter of parents felt completely confident that their child's teachers understood their needs, and more than half of parents of secondary-aged children felt that the school did not fully know how to support their child's emotional wellbeing and mental health.
- Sixty-five per cent of all adopted children did not feel that their teachers fully understand how to support them, and this rose to 74 per cent at secondary school age.
- Traumatized children and young people can often display challenging behaviour for a number of reasons including the effects of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, stress in utero or persistent neglect in infancy. These issues lead to poor self-regulation and problems with sensory processing.
- 'Zero Tolerance' and 'No Excuses' behaviour management policies can be devastating for these children. More than 50 per cent of parents surveyed said that the school's approach to managing their child's behaviour was unhelpful. These children need a safe and nurturing school environment with reasonable adjustments made to behaviour policies that take account of their differences.
- The lack of understanding in terms of managing the behaviour of these children and young people is seen in

their high exclusion rates. Adopted children aged 4-7 are 16 times more likely to be excluded than their peers. Over the course of their school career, an adopted child is 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded. Although exclusion may seem like a simple solution to persistent disruptive behaviour, it simply shifts the problem elsewhere.

- Recommendations made in the report for closing the understanding gap include: making it mandatory for every school governing body to have a designated member with responsibility for previously looked-after children; collecting and analysing full data on attainment, special needs and exclusions for previously looked-after children; establishing a programme of continuing professional development for education professionals, using tried and tested programmes such as Adoption UK Northern Ireland's Let's Learn Together training, Getting it Right for Every Child from Adoption UK in Wales, and Adoption UK Scotland's Attachment-Aware; and amending professional standards for teachers (e.g. Teacher Standards in England) to include looked-after and previously looked-after children as a group requiring particular attention.

The empathy gap

- Trauma, abuse and neglect experienced early in life can have a devastating effect on children's ability to form and maintain relationships. Traumatised children may have a very low sense of their own self-worth and a deep-rooted sense of shame. They may never have learned to regulate their own emotions, and the loss of many important relationships makes it hard for them to form secure attachments.
- Relationships with both adults and children may be difficult for adopted children. They may struggle to read social cues, and react in surprising ways to everyday situations, including with physical or verbal aggression.
- Difficulties with peer relationships are a constant feature of many adopted young people's lives. Forty-six per cent of parents said that their child had been bullied at school, and this rose to 63 per cent for secondary-aged children. Two thirds of secondary-aged children said that they had been teased or bullied specifically because they were adopted. Breaks and lunchtimes can be particularly challenging, with 60 per cent of parents reporting that their children experienced difficulties during these times.
- Schools must cultivate empathy in order to recognise and deal with the additional difficulties which adopted children face.
- Children whose lives have been impacted by persistent traumatic experiences are unable to heal themselves and must instead rely on the adults around them to understand and support them. Efforts to do so can, however, be hampered by a pressured environment of accountability and testing. This, combined with high teacher workload and stress is making it more difficult for staff to maintain the quality of their relationship with their pupils.
- There are a number of recommendations made in the report for closing the empathy gap. These are: reviewing procedures around SEND/ALN/ASN assessments and classifications to accurately reflect the range of challenges faced by adopted and previously looked-after children; ensuring that personal and social education programmes include content on foster care, adoption and kinship care, with a strong anti-bullying emphasis; commissioning an advocacy and 'buddying' scheme for parents and carers of previously looked-after children to support them in accessing education services for their children; and assessing primary admissions procedures to explore flexibility around school starting age and the possible

benefits of flexi-schooling during the first school years.

The resources gap

- Investing in the social and emotional wellbeing of adopted and previously looked-after children will pay great dividends. Enabling them to reach their potential academically will bring wider benefits to school life and society at large.
- Government policy has to some extent recognised the needs of this group. The roles of virtual heads and designated teachers have been extended to include adopted children. In 2014, Pupil Premium funding was expanded to include previously looked-after children in England. Commonly called Pupil Premium Plus, this fund of £2300 per eligible pupil, is given directly to schools each year.
- Adoptive parents have expressed concerns about how this money is used, with 63 per cent stating that their child's school is not transparent about how the funding is spent.
- In order to access the higher levels of special needs funding and support necessary for their children, some adoptive parents are forced to face more barriers and even to go to tribunals.
- Much of what is needed to close the resource gap already exists in some form. However, strong leadership is now needed to end the postcode lottery of provision.
- Recommendations for closing the resources gap include: ensuring that the spending of funding for adopted children is properly scrutinised; improving statutory guidance to schools on the use of targeted funding streams, and making it mandatory for schools to consult with parents and guardians on the use of the funds; issuing improved statutory guidance and providing stronger oversight around Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans; and reviewing funding for eligible children who are home educated, in independent education and adopted from overseas.

The attainment gap

- In England, only 25 per cent of looked-after children and 30 per cent of previously looked-after children achieved the expected standard at Key Stage 2 in 2016, compared to 54 per cent of their peers. In 2016, only a quarter of previously looked-after children achieved five good GCSE grades (including English and maths) compared to over 53 per cent of their peers. Fewer than 14 per cent of looked-after children achieved this standard.
- Department for Education research suggests that a person who leaves school with five or more good grades at GCSE will earn on average £100,000 more across their lifetime than those who do not. Those who leave school at 16 with no qualifications do so at great cost not only to themselves, but to society in terms of lost output.
- For the above reasons the report concludes that adopted children will achieve more in school when they are understood better, when there is greater empathy amongst staff and pupils for the challenges they face, and when resources come closer to meeting the scale of their needs.

The full document can be downloaded from:
<https://www.adoptionuk.org/equal-chance-campaign>