



**adoptionuk**  
for every adoptive family

## Welcoming an adopted child to your nursery

**Starting nursery or pre-school can be a daunting time for any child. For children who have been adopted, there can be many additional layers of complexity. This short guide gives an overview of some issues facing adopted children and their families, and practical strategies to help nurseries and families work together to enable an adopted child to settle in and to thrive.**

### What is Adoption?

Adoption is a legal and permanent way of providing a new family for a child who cannot live with their birth family. Once an adoption order is granted, all legal responsibilities and rights are transferred to a child's adoptive parents.

Sadly, in the majority of cases, this happens when a judge has decided that the severity of abuse and/or neglect that the child has experienced justifies permanent removal from their birth parents, and no other family member is able to care for them.

Once they enter the care system, a child will usually live with a temporary foster family. Some children will experience several changes of family during this time, and will continue to have regular contact with their birth families. Many will be separated from their siblings.

The process is not over once a child is first placed with their adoptive family. They are still legally a looked-after child until a judge grants an adoption order. At this stage the child may still be using their birth surname, there will be children's services involvement, and the prospective adoptive parents may not have full legal parental rights. Adoptive parents must wait for at least 10 weeks to apply for an adoption order, and the process will usually take several months to be completed, or longer in some cases.

The average age of adoption in 2016 was 3 years 5 months. This means that some adopted children entering nursery will only recently have been adopted, or may still be legally looked after, although they are living with their prospective adoptive parents. Others may be living with carers on concurrent planning or foster to adopt arrangements.

### Action Points

Talk to the child's parents about their child's legal status. Is the child legally adopted or still looked after? By what name will the child be known? Is this the same as their legal name and, if not, what procedures will be put in place to ensure that all staff know to use the preferred name? If the child's name is likely to change, how will that be handled?

### The Impact of Early Experiences

There is a growing body of scientific evidence that a child's earliest experiences have an immense and long-lasting impact on their development which is not fixed simply by being placed in a loving adoptive family.

There is not the scope within this short guide to provide a comprehensive overview of the difficulties faced by some adopted children. However there are some common issues that may be relevant in school:

**Attachment:** in ideal circumstances, a child will express their needs and have them consistently met by their primary caregiver. This, repeated many times a day, along with other nurturing behaviours (rocking, smiling etc.) will help to build a strong attachment, creating a secure foundation for the child. When a child's care has been persistently neglectful or unpredictable, it is hard to establish a secure attachment and the child learns early that adults can't be trusted and the world is not safe. Without a secure foundation, it is harder for a child to explore their world, make new relationships and learn. A range of responses may develop in response to inconsistent and

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neglectful care, including passivity, anxiety, fear or excessive compliance.

**Difficulties with self-regulation:** a young baby learns how to manage their emotional state through the relationship with their primary caregiver. If a child is often hungry, tired, frightened or hurt and not comforted, this skill is not learnt. A child exposed to a chaotic environment develops a strong flight-fight-freeze response which is hard to overcome, and may be set off by triggers which are not obvious to the child or the adults around them. Food can be particularly difficult and some will need support around snacks, party food etc.

**Sensory integration difficulties:** the brain function of assimilating and making sense of sensory information may not work as well for children who have been exposed to drugs or alcohol in the womb. This can make it harder for some children to sit still, manage noises and crowds, or deal with other sensory input, such as scratchy clothing.

**Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders:** this is an umbrella term for a range of diagnoses caused by exposure to alcohol in the womb. Alcohol crosses the placenta in the bloodstream of a developing foetus, and can affect physical and brain development in a number of ways. Up to 70% of adopted children have been exposed to alcohol in the womb.

## Action Points

Adoptive parents know their children's backgrounds and are the best source of information on a child's needs. Meet with the parents before the child starts nursery, discuss what is known of the child's needs and work together to put an initial plan in place to support the child. Build in a cycle of reflection and review. Source training for all staff on areas such as attachment.

## Some Strategies

No two adopted children are exactly the same, but there are some common strategies which adoptive parents have told us have improved their children's experiences of nursery:

**Key person:** for an adopted child, this person can do more than monitor progress; they can act as an attachment figure and a 'safe base' for the child, supporting at transitions and checking-in throughout the day. However, be aware that a child's primary attachment should be to their parent and this should be actively promoted.

**Think baby:** the social and emotional age of a child who has experienced developmental trauma is often much lower than their chronological age. Difficulties may appear to be

'extreme' versions of normal toddler behaviour, but the root of that may be in loss and trauma, and approaches need to be tailored accordingly.

**Support primary attachments:** children who have experienced broken attachments, losses and transitions need support to build an attachment relationship with their adoptive family. Consider allowing parents and children extra time at drop-off and pick-up, and help the child to keep their parent in mind throughout the day e.g. by using transition objects from home.

**Communications:** adoptive parents are better able to support their children to manage at nursery if they are fully informed of situations such as staff absence, changes to usual routines etc. Regular home-nursery communications in an agreed format (e.g. text, email, logbook) ensure that parents and staff are working together to support children.

## What support is available?

**Early Years Pupil Premium:** (from term after 3rd birthday). Ofsted says this must be spent on "...helping adopted children emotionally, socially and educationally by providing specific support to raise their attainment and address their wider needs." It is good practice to discuss its use with parents, but possible uses include training/resources for staff, providing calm boxes/areas, providing therapeutic services, Adoption UK membership.

**Virtual schools:** the Children and Social Work Bill 2017, increased the role of virtual schools to include adopted children. They can offer advice and support.

**Post-adoption social workers:** if families are involved with post-adoption support, social workers can be a useful source of advice and information.

**Adoption UK:** we offer a range of resources for adoptive parents, schools and nurseries on our website: [www.adoptionuk.org.uk](http://www.adoptionuk.org.uk)

**Adoption UK** can provide support, advice, training and guidance to schools and nurseries through our **schools membership scheme** which includes discounted deals with our partner training providers.

Members also receive access to our online INSET materials and other downloadable resources, regular news updates, and Adoption UK's publications including our bi-monthly magazine.

For more information:

[www.adoptionuk.org.uk/schools-campaign](http://www.adoptionuk.org.uk/schools-campaign)