

Introduction

This leaflet has been produced by a group of adoptive parents in PACS, Post Adoption Central Support, which is funded by Clackmannan, Falkirk and Stirling Councils. It has arisen from experiences these parents and children have had in local schools in the last few years. Parents believe that their children have been deeply affected by their experiences of separation from their previous main carers and that this can come out in unexpected and at times dramatic ways. They would like to work with their children's teachers.

What are attachment issues?

'Attachment Issues' is a phrase being used at present to describe a variety of behaviours which may arise after a child has lost his/her 'primary carer', often the mother, and has experienced emotional abandonment in early years. These behaviours can show themselves in many ways – children become overanxious to please, desperate to do anything to escape another abandonment. Some act out their chaotic feelings in chaotic behaviour. Others turn in on their own pain and withdraw, unable to relate to others. Either way, this can present major problems to the schools they are in.

Why are we talking about attachment issues?

Society expects that children in the care of local authorities (looked after children) may show such behaviours, but adopted children are thought of as the 'lucky ones' who should be settled with their new families and not be behaving in these ways. But ALL adopted children – babies, toddlers and older ones – will have experienced grief, loss and trauma. Many will have been neglected and abused along the way.

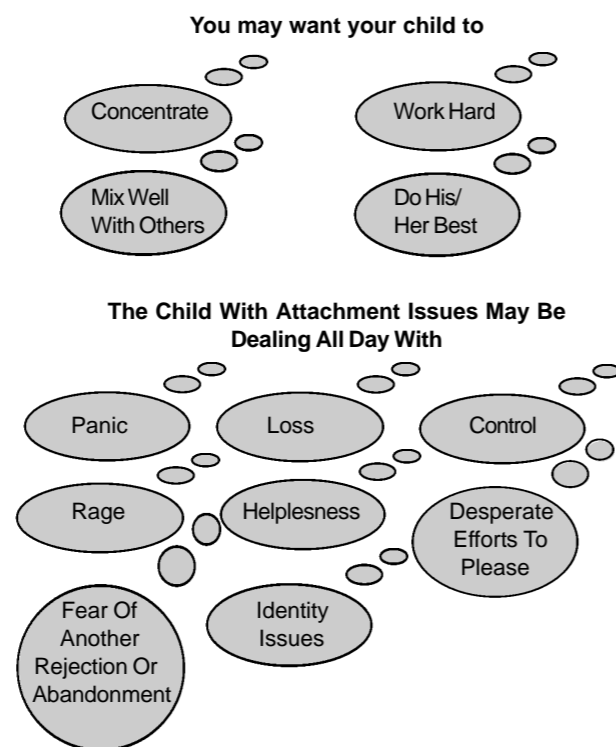
As a group of adoptive parents we believe that many children who display challenging behaviour in our schools are affected by attachment issues. We know how confusing and difficult their behaviour can be to live with and they are sometimes criticised, rejected and even excluded from school. But we think that our children are entitled to receive understanding and support as they struggle to come to terms with the pain inside them. If they are constantly labelled as 'naughty' or 'difficult', what hope is there for them in the future? They deserve better.

Is it only adopted children who have attachment issues?

No, of course not. Anyone who has had interrupted care in their lives may experience difficulties in making attachments. If a child has had to stay in hospital either at birth or later, if the mother has had post-natal depression or family life has broken down because of divorce or substance misuse, attachment issues may set in. Adopted children are especially vulnerable. Many more older children are being placed with adoptive families after long histories of abuse, neglect and moves in and out of foster care.

People used to think that babies who were adopted "would not notice" the change. Research now shows this is not the case – babies DO notice when the birth mother disappears. Issues of grief and loss may recur for them at different points of their lives.

So how does this affect the children at school

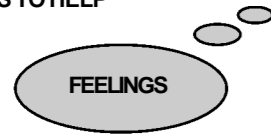


What sort of behaviours can result from attachment issues and why

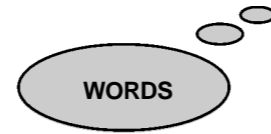
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| Poor concentration | maybe because | Scanning the room all the time for danger. Sights, smells and sounds can trigger desperate feelings of panic as reminders of past trauma. |
| Turning around | maybe because | Danger may come from behind |
| Talking all the time | maybe because | Life feels safer that way |
| Constant asking of the teacher apparently trivial questions | maybe because | It feels too dangerous to 'get it wrong' |
| Ignoring instructions | maybe because | Too much anxiety to be able to listen |
| In trouble at intervals | maybe because | Panic sets in when in crowds |
| Disruptive behaviour | maybe because | Contact with birth family may be just coming or has just happened |
| Trying to create chaos and mayhem | maybe because | It feels chaotic inside so it feels safer if its around outside as well |
| Refusal to be helped with new work | maybe because | I was left helpless – I'll never be helpless again |
| Lying, stealing, secret lives | maybe because | Life may feel like a lie – I am not sure who I am or what the truth is. I don't know the difference between fantasy and reality |
| Special "explosions" around maths and spelling | maybe because | It is clear when maths and spelling is wrong, and being wrong may lead to rejection AGAIN |
| Sulkiness at meetings with head teachers or others in authority | maybe because | The child has no words to describe his/ her feelings - looking sulky is a cover up |
| Behaviour suddenly deteriorates | maybe because | A new sibling has arrived, or there is a painful anniversary or changes at home |

So what can you do

PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP



- Validate the child's feelings e.g. "You feel really angry today about this, don't you? It seems as if you are finding this really hard".
- The child will probably deny it at the time but will know inside that he/she IS BEING LISTENED TO. In that atmosphere, the need for 'dramatic' behaviour may lessen.
- Try not to tell them "don't be silly", "its only trivial", "it doesn't matter". It may be trivial to you but not to them.
- You are the responsible adult in the child's life at school. If you show the child you are trying to hear what he/she are saying through their behaviour, the panic may subside gradually and the behaviour improve.
- Constant scanning for danger, especially behind them, can make adopted children sensitive people, who would enjoy and be good at caring for someone else.
- The child desperately needs the message "I want you here". Avoid threats of removal, exclusion etc. That is the greatest fear. If he/she needs to be removed from a room, try to put it positively e.g. "lets go to see Mrs. X".



- Try to find a way to reach the child other than through words. Words may be very difficult for adopted children, and yet they are expected to use words at school a lot of the time. If a child won't tell you 'what it is', he/she can face more rejection. Maybe he/she CAN'T!
- Think for the child.
- Use music, dance, drama, play, art, poetry whenever possible to give the child alternatives to words as a means of expression.
- If you confront the child head on and use scathing language, you may be reinforcing the child's belief that he /she is totally valueless – so valueless that he/she was 'given away'.



- Explain clearly any changes in routine and staffing. Explain the arrival of supply teachers. Explain why the regular teacher cannot be there. Otherwise the child will think the teacher has left because of him/her.
- Check that teaching material does not make it harder for the adopted child e.g. my family, family trees, genetics, sex education. Revealing information about adoption may make the child feel uncomfortable and different.
- Could another seat in the class be better e.g. next to a wall so there is less danger.

- At lunchtimes or noisy times is there someone a child could be with who will be reassuring – maybe an older pupil or adult helper. Ask the child who he/she would feel safe with.
- If a child is going into 'overload', have strategies to help defuse the situation e.g. listen to a tape, paint a picture, change to a less stressful activity.
- Look for creative talents and gifts.

MORE INFORMATION

Talk to parents – they often know what strategies work best for their child. They are usually expert at it!

Some useful books:

First steps in parenting the child who hurts – Tiddlers and Toddlers. Caroline Archer, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 1999. ISBN 1 85302 801 0.

Next steps in parenting the child who hurts – Tykes and Teens. Caroline Archer, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 1999. ISBN 1 85302 802 9.

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Adoption, Attachment Issues and your School



P.A.C.S.

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