



Bridging the Gap

Giving adopted children
an equal chance in school

adoptionuk
for every adoptive family

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In schools and classrooms around the UK, a group of children are falling dramatically behind. They are more likely to be excluded, more likely to have social, emotional and mental health difficulties and more likely to leave school with no qualifications.

Adopted children achieve about half as well as their peers in statutory examinations¹, and are 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school².

With the link between social and emotional wellbeing and educational attainment so well documented, Adoption UK surveyed more than 2,000 adoptive parents, and nearly 2,000 adopted young people, to explore how effectively their social and emotional wellbeing was supported in school.

The survey revealed the challenging daily reality of school life for adoptive families and their children:

- 79% of adopted children and young people agreed with the statement “I feel confused and worried at school”
- Almost three quarters of adopted children and young people agreed with the statement “Other children seem to enjoy school more than me”
- Two thirds of secondary-aged adopted young people told us that they had been teased or bullied at school because they are adopted
- Almost 70% of parents feel that their adopted child’s progress in learning is affected by problems with their wellbeing in school
- 60% of adoptive parents do not feel that their child has an equal chance at school



‘Previously looked-after children’ is a term which encompasses all children who have left care as a result of being adopted, or are living permanently with family members or guardians as a result of a legal permanence order (e.g. a Special Guardianship Order in England). In some parts of the UK the term ‘care experienced children and young people’ is also used. While our survey concentrated on adoptive families, this report also sometimes refers to previously looked-after children living in other types of families. Their life experiences are so similar and attainment statistics suggest that they face the same challenges in education.

Our research highlighted four gaps which must be bridged if adopted children are to have an equal chance in school:

The Understanding Gap: a history of abuse, neglect and trauma impacts a child in myriad ways. A full understanding of this impact is the necessary starting point for meeting the needs of adopted and previously looked-after children in school.

How to bridge the understanding gap: *a programme of continuing professional development specifically tailored to supporting pupils who have experienced early childhood trauma, for all education professionals.*

The Empathy Gap: traumatised children can react to everyday events in surprising ways, which impacts on their relationships with adults and peers. Approaching such children with empathy helps school staff to respond in a way that will support emotional wellbeing.

How to bridge the empathy gap: *reduce the pressure for academic achievement at all costs and prioritise emotional and social literacy in schools, giving staff and students the time and space to develop meaningful, supportive relationships.*

The Resources Gap: schools are under financial pressure with resources stretched thinly in all areas, but investing in the social and emotional wellbeing of adopted and previously looked-after children will pay great dividends, both in enabling them to reach their potential academically, and in wider benefits to school life and society at large.

How to bridge the resources gap: *end the postcode lottery to ensure that there is parity of funding and provision of specialist support regardless of where in the UK previously looked-after children attend school.*

The Attainment Gap: we do not have enough government data to get a full picture of the attainment of adopted and previously looked-after children but, where data is collected, it shows that they lag significantly behind their peers.

How to bridge the attainment gap: *lay the foundations by collecting and analysing educational outcomes data for previously looked-after children and close the gaps in understanding, empathy and resources.*

Children who have been removed from their birth families, who have experienced abuse, neglect, trauma and loss, and who have sometimes experienced years of uncertainty before settling with their permanent families, have not had an equal start to life. We must ensure that we redress the balance by giving them an equal chance in school.

INTRODUCTION

In England alone, schools 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 numbers¹, and there are thousands more in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Every one of these children has suffered the loss of their first family. The majority of them have been removed into care because of abuse or neglect. The impact of repeated traumatic experiences, of disrupted attachments, and of life-changing transitions from home to home is not simply wiped away when a child settles with a permanent family.

Years later, we see this played out in school in the form of significantly lower attainment¹, higher levels of social, emotional and mental health need², and a permanent exclusion rate a shocking 20 times higher than their peers².

60% of adoptive parents feel that their child does not have an equal chance in school.

Schools can be a tremendous positive force in the life of a child who has experienced trauma and loss, and there are schools that are doing exemplary work around inclusion, and attachment and trauma awareness. We also know that all previously looked-after children are different, and some will thrive at school.

Yet a significant number of children who have already had a terribly unfair start to life struggle to cope in an education system that too often does not recognise the true nature of the challenges they face. This prevents the foundations of knowledge and accomplishment being built, exacerbating social and emotional problems and diminishing life chances.

It is not only the children who are affected. When we do not get it right for previously looked-after children, the impact can ripple out into their classrooms, families and society as a whole. When teachers cannot concentrate on the needs of the many because the needs of the few are so overwhelming, it impacts both them and their other students. When a child's difficulties in school have caused parents to work part time, or even give up work altogether, it erodes their ability to financially and emotionally support their family and contribute to the economy. When children are permanently excluded, or leave school with little in the way of qualifications, it costs us all.

Children who have been removed from their birth families due to abuse or neglect are thankfully a minority in our classrooms, but nearly half of all children will experience at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) during their formative years^{3,4}. The cost of failing to understand and meet their needs falls upon us all. We owe it to them, and to all of us, to give them an equal chance in school.



"I very much regret not finding a school which would support social and emotional development more, because it really is the only thing that counts towards my daughter's future mental health and happiness. I feel like I am watching helplessly as my daughter veers along towards adolescent mental health problems which could be prevented if the best actions could be taken now."

Chris, adoptive parent, England

THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE OF WELLBEING AND ATTAINMENT

The research is clear: children and young people with better wellbeing are likely to achieve academically^{6,7}, make more progress in primary school and be more engaged in secondary school⁷.

In fact, the older children are, the more relevant their emotional and behavioural wellbeing becomes in educational terms. During the secondary school years, emotional wellbeing increases in importance as a factor in attainment, while demographic and other factors decrease⁷.

The link between wellbeing and attainment is a reciprocal one, creating a virtuous circle which can benefit all children, academically as well as emotionally.



The Government's mental health strategy, 'No health without mental health'⁵, defined wellbeing as "A positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment."

CASE STUDY

Cheadle Primary School, Stockport

Adoptive parent, Kelly, knows for certain that she made the right choice when she moved her child to Cheadle Primary School. "It has changed my life," she says.

Kelly's daughter struggled at her previous school, falling foul of inflexible behavioural policies, but she says that Cheadle has an "understanding, open and friendly environment" where teachers are pro-active in contacting parents as issues arise, and involving them in decisions on how to spend Pupil Premium funding.

This inclusive approach is spear-headed by head teacher Karen Leech, who is also an adoptive parent. A number of adopted and looked-after children attend the school, but Karen takes pride in the fact that the school is "able to respond to the individual needs of our children, whatever they may be."

Funding has been used for attachment training for staff, as well as one-to-one counselling and therapy for specific children. "Our staff recognise that children have different emotional needs and they understand that in order to meet those needs, we will provide bespoke provision and children may well be treated differently."

A range of practical strategies support children through particularly challenging issues, such as transitions. Towards the end of each academic year, pupils spend at least one hour every week with the teacher they will have next year, before spending the whole final week of term with them. Karen takes advantage of mixed-age classes at the school to allow some children to keep the same teacher for two years, offering greater stability.

Karen is clear that, "Those leading a school need to have an awareness and understanding of attachment and the associated challenges that it presents. It is not enough if just a few pockets of staff are recognising these children's needs."

THE WELLBEING CRISIS IN OUR CLASSROOMS

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 2015⁹ 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% of teachers said that they felt that focus on exams was disproportionate to the overall wellbeing of their students¹⁰.

Catriona Stewart is the head teacher of a primary school that has received an award for being 'adoption friendly'. She says she battles daily with a system that causes difficulties for many children, including previously looked-after children:

"We have an entire school system built on high levels of cortisol and stress – endless focus on 'accountability', results and endless testing. There is now statutory assessment at the end of Reception, Year 1 phonics, Year 2 SATs, a Year 4 times table test coming in, Year 6 SATs. GCSEs are now so hard, some schools are starting them a year early. We are told to focus on children's mental health within a system that seems determined to destroy it."

The school years can be stressful for any child, but for tens of thousands of children in our schools who have already experienced an awful start to life because of neglect or abuse, the difficulties are compounded.

Children who are looked after or previously looked after are more likely than others to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties¹¹. 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 skills¹¹.

The range of challenges facing children who have suffered early trauma is evident in that nearly half of adopted children have a recognised special educational need or disability (additional support need, or additional learning need), and 45% of these children have social, emotional and mental health needs as their primary area of need².



"[Children] are not able to cope with yelling, screaming, hostility, threats, abuse of power, abandonment, neglect and significant loss. Children are born with a fragile sense of self, and so cannot handle these kinds of threats in ways adults can . . .

. . . We must not fail to understand how extensive and far-reaching the impact of trauma and loss is on every aspect of a child's development. The distortions and pain of betrayal, abandonment and rejection, together with the impaired development of their neurobiology, can seriously impede a child's well-being and cognitive functioning."

**Louise Bombér (2007):
Inside I'm Hurting**

"The child who has experienced early trauma can show a very rapid response to any stress, accompanied by the characteristic 'fight or flight' response."

**Getting it Right for Every Child,
Adoption UK**

What are adoptive families telling us?

In a unique survey of adoptive families carried out by Adoption UK in 2018, we gathered the views of more than 2,000 adoptive parents, representing more than 3,000 children. We also heard directly from nearly 2,000 adopted children and young people from across the United Kingdom.

The results were clear: the emotional wellbeing and mental health of adopted children and young people in our schools is a serious concern, both for parents and for the young people themselves.

In fact, almost 70% of 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. Parents know from experience what the research confirms: when we don't prioritise our children's emotional, social and mental health, their academic progress suffers.

69%



of adoptive parents feel that their child's progress in learning is affected by problems with their emotional wellbeing in school.

"... the energy they expend 'keeping it together' at school goes unnoticed, obstructs their learning and leaves anger and exhaustion for home life."

Claire, adoptive parent, England

What are adopted children and young people telling us?

79% of adopted children and young people agreed with the statement: *"I feel confused at worried at school."*

47% of adopted children said they had been bullied or teased because they are adopted.

74% of secondary-aged adopted children feel that their teachers do not fully understand and support their needs.

81% of secondary-aged adopted children agreed with the statement: *"Other children seem to enjoy school more than me."*



SCHOOL: A SOURCE OF STRESS

Almost 30% of parents reported that school is a source of stress in their family most or all of the time. For children of secondary age, and those with higher level special educational needs, this figure rose to nearly 40%.

More than half of adopted children had expressed concerns and worries about school to their parents. For some families, anxiety about school can become all-consuming. Over a third of parents told us that their adopted child had refused to go to school, run away from school or played truant. For secondary school children, this figure rose to 46%. For so many children who have experienced trauma and loss, just making it to school every morning is a significant achievement.

In the current school climate where children are awarded certificates and prizes for perfect attendance, just over one third of parents reported that their child has had days off school because of their mental health and this rises to 48% of parents of secondary-aged children.

The continuing stress of supporting traumatised children through their education takes its toll on adoptive families. **Fewer than half of adoptive parents feel optimistic about their child's educational future.** Parents of children with higher level special educational needs are even less confident, with 61% feeling pessimistic about their child's educational future. Attainment statistics for adopted children in England suggest that this lack of optimism is well-founded¹.

Perhaps the most telling responses are from the adopted children and young people themselves. **73% of all young respondents told us that they agreed with the statement "Other children seem to enjoy school more than me".**

Families are struggling; children are struggling. In order to give these children an equal chance in school there are four significant gaps which need to be bridged: gaps in understanding, empathy, resources and attainment.

"[School is] a constant source of stress for my child which impacts behaviour at home. My child constantly calls herself dumb and stupid . . . it's very sad to see this in a young child who has already experienced so much trauma."

Gemma,
adoptive parent, Scotland

"[My daughter] has had a lot of time off with stress and anxiety, caused by the absolute poor handling of her support and inability to listen to her concerns and understand what her needs are. Both children have said all they wanted was to be actively listened to - to be really understood and supported."

Andrew,
adoptive parent, England

"I removed my nine-year-old son from school to home educate him because of his deteriorating mental and emotional health."

Rachel,
adoptive parent, England



In our survey



79% of adopted children and young people agreed with the statement:
“ I feel confused and worried at school ”



73% 

of adopted children agreed with the statement:

“ Other children seem to enjoy school more than me. ”

63%



of secondary-aged children said they had been teased or bullied at school because they are adopted.

69%

of adoptive parents feel that their child's learning is affected by problems with their emotional wellbeing in school.



60%



of parents do not feel that their adopted child has an equal chance in school.



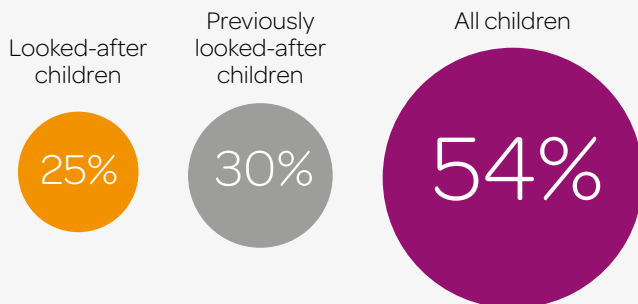
Nearly HALF

of parents of secondary-aged adopted children have had to keep their child off school because of concerns about their mental health or wellbeing.

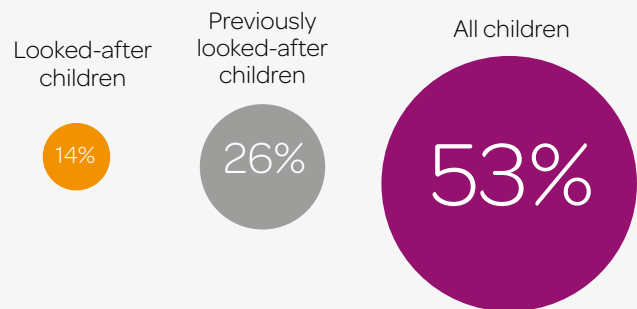


Attainment in English schools*

Percentage of children achieving the expected standard at Key Stage 2 (2016)



Percentage of children achieving 5 good GCSE grades including English and Mathematics (2016)



*Source: DfE (England) 2016

These figures are taken from Adoption UK's Wellbeing and Schools survey, March 2018. The survey gathered responses from 2218 adoptive parents and 1972 adopted children and young people.

THE UNDERSTANDING GAP

A history of abuse, neglect and trauma impacts a child in myriad ways. A full understanding of this impact is the necessary starting point for meeting the needs of previously looked-after children in school.

We know that around three quarters of children who are adopted have experienced neglect and abuse and that this can have long-term impacts on their cognitive, physical, emotional and social development¹². Parenting a child with such a history is challenging enough. Yet each time a child starts a new school, goes into a new class or even gets a substitute teacher, parents have to decide how much of their child's confidential history to share.

If parents and children share their most personal stories, they should be able to trust that education professionals will respond appropriately. All staff members need to have an understanding of the full impact of loss, trauma and insecure attachments on children's development, and how this can impact on their ability to conform to expectations of school life, and to make progress in learning.

Many adopted children feel adrift in an environment where they are not able to meet or sometimes even understand expectations. 64% of adopted children and young people told us that they did not consistently know what their teachers wanted them to do in class, and **79% agreed with the statement "I feel confused and worried at school"**.

Our 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.

Children and young people are similarly concerned. **65% of children did not feel that their teachers fully understand how to support them, and this rose to 74% at secondary school age.**



"The school do not understand trauma and adoption and he was labelled as the naughty boy. We were told we were not being strict with him and it must be our fault he behaves how he does."

Amira, adoptive parent, England

"School under-estimates the effect of change on our children's mental health and wellbeing. They are reacting to behaviours instead of trying to understand the cause."

James, adoptive parent, Northern Ireland

65% 

of children did not feel that their teachers fully understand how to support them, and this rose to 74% at secondary school age.

"I sent my daughter to a local primary school that had a good reputation for nurture. During her time there were four SEND Officers. They all had good hearts, but none of them knew anything about early childhood trauma. When I tried to explain the importance of staff consistency, they told me she shouldn't be allowed to get too attached to any specific teachers. Their approach to a major meltdown was to corral her in the cloakroom and force her to make eye contact. She told me afterwards that she felt like an animal in a zoo. She was six at the time."

Laura, adoptive parent, England

Traumatised children and young people can often display challenging and unexpected behaviour at school because of their early life experiences. Many parents have found that traditional methods of managing behaviour have little positive effect and can actually be counter-productive, as the difficulties are often rooted in trauma or conditions such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder rather than a lack of motivation to 'be good' or 'behave'. Prolonged stress in utero and during infancy, and persistent neglect, can affect brain development and lead to a range of invisible disabilities including problems with self-regulation, sensory processing and executive functioning.

Carrot and stick methods of behaviour management will only work if the child is capable of the required behaviour. For children with these types of invisible and poorly-understood disabilities, 'Zero Tolerance' and 'No Excuses' behaviour management policies can be devastating. In fact **more than 50% of parents said that the school's approach to managing their child's behaviour was unhelpful for their child.** These children need a safe and nurturing school environment with reasonable adjustments made to behaviour policies that take account of their differences.

Exclusions statistics show the devastating impact. Children with identified special educational needs account for almost half of all permanent and fixed period exclusions from school in England¹³. Children with social, emotional and mental health needs are ten times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion¹³. Adopted children are over-represented in both of those groups².

Even the very youngest children are affected. Adopted children aged 4-7 are 16 times more likely to be excluded than their peers². Over the course of their school career, an adopted child is 20 times more likely to be permanently excluded².

With growing evidence that schools are 'off-rolling' children¹⁴ who pose behavioural challenges or are likely to negatively skew league tables, official exclusion statistics may be just the tip of the iceberg.

Excluding a child may seem like a simple and obvious solution to persistent disruptive behaviour that drains staff time and resources, and affects the other children in the classroom. However, all exclusion does is shift the 'problem' elsewhere, while adding another layer of rejection onto an already hurt and troubled child.



"Lack of consistency amongst teachers and support workers when dealing with disciplinary issues has had a hugely negative impact on my child."

Declan,
adoptive parent, England

"She gets more stressed if she has to go to school if she's been in trouble the day before. Some days . . . she picks at her skin and I have to rock her some nights like she is a baby to calm her down."

Karen,
adoptive parent, England

"'Off-rolling'. It's a term that describes a process that ought to worry us. Because, if the test of an education system is what it does for its most vulnerable - its most marginalised - then this is a word that is often about those young people."

Geoff Barton,
General Secretary of the ACSL¹⁵

"I have been shocked by the way that schools are allowed to use exclusion to 'manage' the behaviour of a hurt 4 year old."

Anna,
adoptive parent, Wales

If these most vulnerable children are to have an equal chance in school, then education professionals need resourcing, not only with finances and professional support, but also with the right information to help them support traumatised children. Currently, provision of information and training is patchy across the UK. The Scottish Government has provided Adoption UK with funds to equip every school with a copy of *Let's Learn Together*. Similar publications are available in other nations, but funding for distribution has not been made available.

In England, the Department for Education has funded attachment awareness training for schools in two areas, delivered by Adoption UK and PAC-UK, but schools outside those areas are missing out. Without government intervention, many schools may not appreciate the need for such training, or have the funds to pay for it.

Adoptive parents have frequently told us how an attachment and trauma-aware school has transformed their child's chances at an education. If some schools can make this change, surely all schools can.

"My child moved from a school with no understanding, or willingness to understand his attachment and trauma issues. It was horrific for him and horrific for us as a family. His new school is understanding, loving, kind, and adopts an amazing approach to wellbeing. He is like a new boy. It can work. It just needs people with the right attitude."

**Sophie,
adoptive parent, England**

How to bridge the understanding gap: *a programme of continuing professional development specifically tailored to supporting pupils who have experienced early childhood trauma, for all education professionals.*

CASE STUDY

Colebourne Primary School, Birmingham

The atmosphere at Colebourne is calm and purposeful. The school operates a "No Shouting; No Shaming" behavioural policy devised by head teacher and adoptive parent, Stuart Guest. Behavioural challenges are met with support plans rather than rewards and sanctions, every member of staff benefits from a cycle of attachment and trauma training, and every child has a personal profile, regardless of need.

Stuart passionately believes that children's emotional needs are as important as their academic needs, and that the two are not mutually exclusive. Although his 400-pupil school has no adopted or looked-after children currently enrolled, he knows that many of his students have experienced traumatic events, loss, separation and family breakdown. As he says, "That is a lot of children, carrying a lot of hurt."

The vision is underpinned by whole-school systems and processes that every member of staff has bought into. Teachers, support staff, playground supervisors and office staff all have their role to play. Incidents are carefully logged, patterns identified, and preventative strategies put into place. The re-drafted behaviour strategy bears the motto: "Thinking of a child as behaving badly disposes you to think of punishment. Thinking of a child as struggling to handle something difficult encourages you to help them through their distress."

The results are clear. With attendance up, attainment up, and exclusions and behavioural incidents reduced, Stuart is now a champion of attachment and trauma-informed practice in all schools.

THE EMPATHY GAP

Traumatised children can react to everyday events in surprising ways, which impacts on their relationships with adults and peers. Approaching such children with empathy helps school staff to respond in a way that will support emotional wellbeing.

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 – birth family, wider family, foster carers – 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 aggression¹⁶. A traumatised child may seem like a toddler in a much older child's body.

Difficulties with peer relationships are a constant feature of many adopted young people's lives. **46% of parents said that their child had been bullied at school, and this rose to 63% 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 particular flashpoints, with 60% of parents reporting that their children experienced difficulties during these times.

It is vital that schools recognise that traumatised children – whatever their legal status – require specific support in managing peer relationships and that, for adopted children, being teased because of their adopted status needs to be treated as seriously as other forms of targeted bullying.

Children whose lives have been impacted by persistent traumatic experiences are unable to heal themselves and must instead rely on the adults – all the adults – around them to understand and support them. Yet the current league table-focused culture is causing difficulties for teachers too, who report that pressure to improve attainment in tests and exams, combined with their own workload and stress is making it more difficult for them to maintain the quality of their relationship with their pupils¹⁷.

It can be hard for adults and children in school to empathise with adopted children. The adults need to lead the way, helping adopted children form secure relationships with their teachers and their peers. As de Thierry says, "When a person has been hurt in a relationship, they can only be healed in a relationship."¹⁸ The impact of adults in the school environment providing those safe, stable relationships with struggling children cannot be over-estimated.

How to bridge the empathy gap: *reduce the pressure for academic achievement at all costs and prioritise emotional and social literacy in schools, giving staff and students the time and space to develop meaningful, supportive relationships.*

"The teacher makes a huge difference . . . This year she has a caring, understanding teacher who shows her she likes and accepts her. This teacher has gone above and beyond to help my daughter and support us as a family."

Kate, adoptive parent, Scotland

"My eldest son tried to commit suicide in mainstream school due to bullying."

Alun, adoptive parent, Wales

"The school policy is to split up friend groups, especially 'best friends', every year, which they believe encourages larger friend groups . . . it has been devastating for my daughter who has a hard time building strong, close relationships with friends."

Lynn, adoptive parent, Wales

THE RESOURCES GAP

Schools are under financial pressure with resources stretched thinly in all areas, but investing in the social and emotional wellbeing of adopted and previously looked-after children will pay great dividends, both in enabling them to reach their potential academically, and in wider benefits to school life and society at large.

In recent years, legislative and funding changes in England have sought to recognise the challenges faced by many previously looked-after children in schools. The extension of the roles of virtual school heads and designated teachers to include previously looked-after children is welcome acknowledgement of the enduring impact of trauma, neglect and abuse.

However, the National Association for Virtual School Heads is already warning about lack of capacity to expand their role. Incoming chair, Sally Kelly, said that virtual heads are “already receiving a huge increase in requests for support and guidance from schools, social workers and parents and carers, putting extra workload on an already strained service.”¹⁹ If virtual school heads are to meet the needs of more than 42,500 children that are being added to their caseload, adequate funding is essential.

In 2014, Pupil Premium funding designed to reduce the attainment gap caused by disadvantage 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. However, many adoptive parents have expressed concerns about how this money is being used.

63% of adoptive parents feel that their child’s school is not transparent in the way it uses Pupil Premium Plus, and two thirds feel that the funds are not being used appropriately to support their child’s needs. This funding has been set apart on the basis that previously looked-after children face significant challenges in education¹², and it is vital that it is used effectively to support the children it is meant to benefit.

Parents are the experts on their children. Working together in partnership, parents and education professionals can each bring their expertise to bear so that vulnerable children get the very best support. In England, the new statutory guidance for designated teachers states that they should “encourage parents and guardians’ involvement in deciding how the [Pupil Premium Plus] is used to support their child.”¹² This is a welcome step towards recognising the important role that parents and guardians can play in supporting schools to meet their children’s needs.

However, Pupil Premium Plus funding is not available to all children. Children who are home educated or attend an independent school are not eligible. Children adopted from outside of England and Wales are not eligible, even if they attend an English school.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the situation is quite different to that of England. Although each nation has funds designed to benefit looked-after children and to reduce the attainment gap caused by economic disadvantage, none yet recognise previously looked-after children as a specific group requiring additional support. Bluntly, once a looked-after child is adopted, the support they previously received falls away overnight.

Accessing special educational needs or additional learning needs support can also be an uphill struggle for adoptive families. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, sensory processing disorder and reactive attachment disorder are relatively uncommon conditions that many teachers may not have heard of, yet they affect thousands of looked-after and previously looked-after children.

“We asked about the Pupil Premium and were told that it’s a very small amount of money and not to think it would cover getting any assistance for our child.”

Sian, adoptive parent, England

63%



of adoptive parents feel that their child’s school is not transparent in the way it uses Pupil Premium Plus.

“The school does not have enough support available to them to support my child. Specialist services/advice and guidance are costly to schools with limited budgets.”

Jonathan, adoptive parent, Wales

In order to access higher levels of special needs funding and support for their children, some adoptive parents are forced to jump through ever-higher hoops, including going to tribunals to get the appropriate support. As one parent told us in our survey, “It is too difficult to make the case for an [Education, Health and Care Plan] on the grounds of mental health at the moment, despite the fact that mental health is a major barrier to learning for our children.”

Investment in children during their school years will pay dividends in the long term. Much of what is needed to close the resource gap already exists in some form. What is needed now is strong leadership to end the postcode lottery of provision, and ensure that all schools are properly funded and resourced.

How to bridge the resources gap: end the postcode lottery to ensure that there is parity of funding and provision of specialist support regardless of where in the UK previously looked-after children attend school.

“I started pushing for a statement/EHCP for my daughter in Year 2. She was spending parts of every day running around the school or hiding in the toilets and seemed to be learning nothing. At one point she was informally excluded. I was repeatedly told her needs weren’t great enough to make an application. I watched her slip further and further behind academically and emotionally . . . [In Year 6] I made my own application for an EHCP and, when it was rejected, threatened to go to tribunal. Magically things fell into place. The Ed Psych said she couldn’t believe it had ever been questioned.”

Abi, adoptive parent, England



THE ATTAINMENT GAP

We do not have enough government data to get a full picture of the attainment of previously looked-after children but, where data is collected, it shows that they lag significantly behind their peers.

Considering the link between social and emotional wellbeing, mental health and attainment, it is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising, that the academic achievement of looked-after and previously looked-after children is significantly below that of their peers. In England, only 25% of looked-after children and 30% of previously looked-after children achieved the expected standard at Key Stage 2 in 2016, compared to 54% of their peers¹.

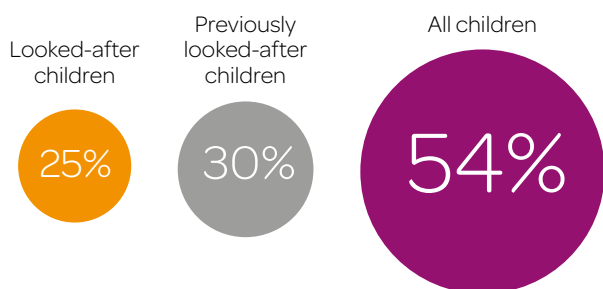
The picture at GCSE is similarly bleak. In 2016, only a quarter of previously looked-after children achieved five good GCSE grades (including English and Maths) compared to over 53% of their peers. Fewer than 14% of looked-after children achieved the same standard¹.

The new measures of attainment introduced in 2017 show that the gap remains significant, with previously looked-after children's attainment being much lower than their peers on every measure. Just 32.8% achieved a pass in English and Mathematics, compared to 58.9% of their peers²⁰.

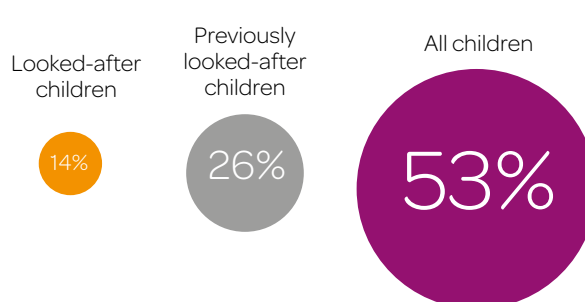
The attainment gap between previously looked-after children and their peers has only recently begun to emerge in England as the DfE have begun releasing experimental statistical data for the first time. This data is not collected in the rest of the UK. We simply do not have a clear national picture of the educational outcomes of tens of thousands of vulnerable children.

"My daughter had difficulties all through secondary school but as she is quiet they said it would be fine. Now in Year 11, she is not going to school and is unlikely to get any qualifications. She has never been properly assessed."
Selena, adoptive parent, England

Percentage of children achieving the expected standard at Key Stage 2 (2016)



Percentage of children achieving 5 good GCSE grades including English and Mathematics (2016)



Attainment matters. 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. The research notes that pupils "who leave school at age 16 without any qualifications do so at large economic cost to themselves and to society in terms of lost output."²¹ Allowing a large cohort of children to fail at school through lack of support and understanding of the extent of their needs is not just a tragedy for them, it is a loss for the whole nation.

How to bridge the attainment gap: *lay the foundations by collecting and analysing educational outcomes data for previously looked-after children and close the gaps in understanding, empathy and resources.*

BRIDGING THE GAP

There are over 42,500 children in England alone who have left care as a result of being adopted, or under a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order. There are thousands more in schools in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. When we also consider the tens of thousands of looked-after children, and children in need, it becomes clear that trauma affects a significant proportion of children in our education system.

These children are more likely to have social, emotional and mental health needs, more likely to be excluded, more likely to leave school with few qualifications. The mental health and academic attainment of this group of children is being put at risk if education professionals are untrained and ill-equipped to support them effectively.

60% of adoptive parents feel that their child does not have an equal chance in school.

This needs to change. At a governmental level, it's time to place the educational and mental health needs of vulnerable children and young people front and centre in legislative, funding and policy decisions, for the children's sake, and for the benefit of society as a whole. Schools need the knowledge, support and funding to ensure that all children are given an equal chance at an education, and families, children and young people must be listened to and supported to make sure that children who have already been through so much are not let down again.

Existing funds designed to support previously looked-after children need to be put to best use, and schools must be held to account on the progress these children make. Where funds are not available, changes in legislation are needed so that schools can afford to prioritise meeting the needs of this vulnerable group and reducing the attainment gap.

Training for all school staff is urgently needed to ensure that the needs of traumatised children are understood. Teachers must be given time and space to form meaningful relationships with the children in their classrooms, and those children's families. Focus on tests and results must not take precedence over the wellbeing and mental health of children in our schools. When children are happy, supported and secure, their results will improve.

Children who have already endured so much loss and trauma in their lives deserve schools and teachers that are properly funded, properly equipped and properly trained to ensure they not only survive, but thrive. They deserve an equal chance in school.

60% 

of adoptive parents feel that their child does not have an equal chance in school.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Government to work with educators, voluntary sector and families to bridge the gaps in understanding, empathy, resources and attainment for adopted and all traumatised school-aged children.

Bridging the understanding gap

- Collect and analyse full data on attainment, special needs and exclusions for previously looked-after children. We can take more effective action if we know the full picture.
- Amend professional standards for teachers (e.g. Teacher Standards in England) to include looked-after and previously looked-after children as a group which require particular attention.
- Establish 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 Schools*.
- Commission an online 'Trauma Hub' for education, containing best practice guides, links to relevant legislation and statutory guidance, and signposting to relevant services.
- Make it mandatory for every school governing body to have a designated member with responsibility for previously looked-after children, and make sure that training on the specific needs of these children is mandatory for the role.
- Introduce automatic mental health and developmental assessments for all children moving into care and regularly thereafter, so that adoptive parents and permanent carers have a clear picture of their child's needs to pass on to schools and nurseries.

Bridging the empathy gap

- Review procedures around SEND/ALN/ASN assessments and classifications to accurately reflect the range of challenges faced by adopted and previously looked-after children, e.g. developmental trauma, attachment difficulties and FASD.
- Ensure that personal and social education programmes include content on foster care, adoption and kinship care, with a strong anti-bullying emphasis.
- Commission an advocacy and 'buddying' scheme for parents and carers of previously looked-after children to support them in accessing education services for their children.
- Assess primary admissions procedures to explore flexibility around school starting age and the possible benefits of flexi-schooling during the first school years

Bridging the resources gap

- End the postcode lottery of provision by ensuring that previously looked-after children have access to equivalent funding and support no matter where in the United Kingdom they are educated.
- Ensure that existing funding, e.g. Pupil Equity Fund, Pupil Development Grant, Pupil Premium Plus, is adequate and properly scrutinised with rigorous monitoring of outcomes.
- Improve statutory guidance to schools on the use of targeted funding streams, and make it mandatory for schools to consult with parents and guardians on the use of the funds.
- Issue improved statutory guidance and provide stronger oversight around Education, Health and Care Plans, IDPs (Wales), IEPs in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and CSPs in Scotland.
- Extend additional support routinely offered to looked-after children (e.g. PEPs in England, presumption of Additional Support Needs in Scotland) to all previously looked-after children.
- Review funding for eligible children who are home educated, in independent education and adopted from overseas.

Bridging the attainment gap

- Adopted and all traumatised 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. We must bridge the gap for traumatised children, and make sure school is helping them build the foundations of a brighter future.

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adoptionuk

for every adoptive family

Head Office

Units 11 and 12

Vantage Business Park

Bloxham Road

Banbury OX16 9UX

Phone 01295 752240

Email info@adoptionuk.org.uk

Wales Office

Penhevad Studios

Penhevad Street

Cardiff CF11 7LU

Phone 029 2023 0319

Email wales@adoptionuk.org.uk

Scotland Office

Unit 1 Duddingston Yards

Duddingston Park South

Edinburgh

EH15 3NT

Phone 0131 201 2488

Email scotland@adoptionuk.org.uk

Northern Ireland Office

Adoption UK (at Groundwork)

63-75 Duncairn Gardens

Belfast BT15 2GB

Phone 028 9077 5211

Email northernireland@adoptionuk.org.uk

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