

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Addysg a Dysgu Proffesiynol Athrawon | Inquiry into Teachers' Professional Learning and Education

TT 01

Ymateb gan : Adoption UK

Response from : Adoption UK

What is Adoption UK?

Adoption UK is a national adoption support charity, empowering families to build bright futures for vulnerable children who are unable to live with their birth parents.

All children separated from their birth parents have experienced loss and many will have experienced abuse or neglect. Finding a permanent family will not overcome these experiences alone.

With more than 10,000 individual members and over 40 years experience supporting families, Adoption UK understands the challenges faced. We provide a range of services for families and professionals which include peer-to-peer support groups, family days, specialist training and publications, online support and information and advice through our helpline.

There are at least 3,500 adopted children currently attending school in Wales today and in common with other children who have experienced broken attachments with their main carers and early abuse, neglect and trauma many of those children struggle to cope with their experience of school.

Adoption UK is leading the way in Wales, working closely with the Vulnerable Learners section of Welsh Government to raise awareness of the difficulties that these children experience in relation to their education and suggesting evidence based strategies which help.

Adoption UK welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation and will respond based on evidence gathered from adoptive families across Wales over the last 8 years.

Research and consultation with adoptive families.

We have undertaken a number of research studies of adoptive parents across Wales and the rest of the UK over recent years. Our report ***Support Needs of Adoptive***

Families in Wales was published in 2010. Based on information collected from adoptive families in Wales it contained 4 recommendations regarding education.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Funding should be made available to develop a booklet for adoptive parents to give to school staff in Wales highlighting the particular needs of adopted children. Such booklets have been produced in England and there is a need for specifically Welsh booklet encompassing the Welsh educational system and language.

RECOMMENDATION 2 – Training on attachment difficulties and the effects of early trauma on children within the school system should be incorporated within initial teacher training qualifications, as well as being part of the continuing professional development of teachers, school counsellors and other school based staff.

RECOMMENDATION 3 – The Looked After Children’s Education Co-ordinator in each local authority and the designated person in each school should also be given a remit for adopted children. Training in attachment and early trauma issues should be given to people in those roles. This would provide adoptive parents with a single point of contact in each school.

RECOMMENDATION 4 – School inspections should include consideration of provision made for both looked after and adopted children in schools.

Since that report was published we have been campaigning and working with partners and we are delighted to see that recommendations 1 and 3 have now been accepted and implemented. We would like to take this opportunity to present evidence to you that RECOMMENDATION 2 should now be implemented.

The situation in 2017.

There is a growing awareness of the need for schools to have an understanding of the impact of early trauma and neglect and Adoption UK is currently running an education campaign across the 4 nations of the UK with the aim of making every school an ‘attachement aware’ school. Adoption UK is working closely with partners such as the National Association of Head Teachers in England and Wales to promote awareness and we are asking our members across the UK to be champions and go into schools to push the campaign.

The introduction of the new curriculum in Wales and the central role that Well Being plays in that curriculum is an ideal opportunity to progress this work for the benefit of children and young people across Wales.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Wales Study by Public Health Wales clearly shows that early trauma and neglect lead to far greater risks of mental health and other difficulties in the future. A recent study of a cohort of adopted children across Wales tells us that 44% of them have experienced 4 or more ACEs and are therefore very vulnerable to experiencing future health challenges. Other children who enter

the care system will have similarly high levels of ACEs and will also benefit from the suggestions below.

The following guidance has been drawn up by Adoption UK with the support of the National Association of Head Teachers and has been made available to schools in a free guide which can be found here: www.adoptionuk.org.uk/schoolscampaign

Typical complexities affecting children who have high levels of adverse childhood experiences

1. Developmental trauma

The term 'developmental trauma disorder' can cover any number of difficulties that arise when a child's development is affected in the womb and/or by neglect and abuse after birth. Scientific research shows that this type of complex trauma can impact on every area of a child's development, from their physical health to their thinking, feelings, behaviour, sense of self and ability to form attachments. Two effects that we see frequently in adopted children are Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), which is a pre-birth trauma, and attachment difficulties that occur after birth.

2. Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

FASD is an umbrella term that describes a range of physical and neurological birth defects caused by a woman drinking while pregnant. It is the most common preventable cause of learning difficulties.

Many children who do not display the physical characteristics are often undiagnosed until they show difficulties at school, or are never diagnosed at all. People with FASD do not grow out of it.

Children with FASD can appear bright, articulate and confident, but there are parts of their brain that just do not work well and they can quickly become frustrated, angry and display negative behaviour traits. As these behaviours result from deficits in brain functioning and are beyond the child's control, 'normal' discipline does not improve the child's behaviour and, in fact, may make it worse.

3. Attachment difficulties

Healthy attachments are essential to a child developing well at home, in school, and in wider society. The word 'attachment' can be described as a deep bond between a child and their caregiver that binds them in space, endures over time and creates a sense of safety and stability. Although nobody is born attached, we are born with the drive to form attachments, primarily with our birth mother.

All adopted children will have experienced attachment disruption, often as the result of maternal deprivation, neglect, illness, multiple carers, abuse and/or frequent moves through the care system. As such, these children tend to have an insecure attachment style that results in an anxious, avoidant, angry/ambivalent or disorganised way of relating to others and the world.

Attachment difficulties can make it hard for children to...

- Gain the confidence and the self-motivation that comes from exploring the world from a safe base
- Achieve developmental milestones
- Reach their intellectual potential
- Behave in a socially acceptable way
- Think logically
- Develop a conscience, have empathy
- Become self-reliant
- Cope with stress, frustration, fear, worry
- Develop good relationships with peers and teachers
- Feel like a worthwhile person

4. Developmental gaps

Insecurely attached children often feel, think and act much younger than their chronological age. Gaps in their development can create challenges for them at school, where they are expected to behave with the same maturity as their securely attached peers. This can be frustrating for a child who may have the concentration and stimulation levels of a much younger child and may need learning tools, play activities, nurture, supervision, targets and boundaries appropriate to their developmental, rather than their chronological age.

5. Executive functions

Executive functions are a set of mental processes that help us to learn. We use them to solve problems, remember, manage time and space, plan, organise, start and change activities, set goals and stay on task long enough to achieve them. They also help us to regulate feelings.

6. Toxic stress and anxiety

A little stress is motivating but adopted children will have endured unrelieved bouts of stress that had a toxic effect on their development. This is due mainly to a chemical called cortisol. In quick bursts of stress the body produces adrenalin but when stress is prolonged or chronic, cortisol takes over. High levels of cortisol in early years can cause sensory integration problems and traumatised children can develop anticipatory stress where they expect bad things to happen.

7. Sensory issues

Everyone has occasional sensory integration or processing challenges when the brain is overloaded by sensory information, or deprived of it. But some people go through daily life unable to process and integrate effectively the sensory information they receive through the seven senses of sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, body awareness and movement/balance. Adopted children may fall into this category as developmental trauma affects all areas of a child's functioning. They may get labelled as 'badly behaved'.

In Conclusion

If we wish to prepare teachers to be able to deliver a new curriculum in which children's wellbeing is a priority we must ensure that they understand the basics of early child development and the impact of early trauma and neglect on children and their ability to learn. We urge the Welsh Government to ensure that initial teacher training and the ongoing professional development of teachers includes these areas of knowledge.