

Teacher Toolkit Series: Top Tips for Teachers of Children who are adopted

Adoption UK in Scotland is an independent voluntary organisation that supports adoptive families in Scotland. Along with training workshops, peer support groups and family events we provide information services through our helpline, website and factsheets around issues affecting children who have previously been looked after and are now living with their permanent adoptive families. As with every child, it's crucial that their classroom environment is safe and productive, however adopted and looked-after children are more likely to experience school exclusions and leave school with lower than average educational attainment. Adopted children can have more positive outcomes, given the right support at home and in school. The following tips have been put together by **David Woodier**, support teacher, adoptive parent and former member of our Advisory Group, with input from another of our adoptive parent members who is also a primary school teacher.

Attachment seeking: Adopted children may use attention seeking behaviours such as constantly trying to engage adults in conversation. They may think if they don't speak to you, you will forget they exist. One suggestion is to create a regular slot each day for them to tell you one thing. In addition, help them learn to work more independently by giving them strategies to use when they feel stuck without letting them feel that you have abandoned them.

Danger may lurk around every corner: Adopted children may be anxious when dealing with new experiences or people. Whenever possible, plan ahead to minimise surprises. Inform parents of changes to routine in advance so they can help prepare the child. An adopted child may have a heightened sense of danger. An adult visiting class, or unexpected movement or noise could be a source of danger to them. They are unlikely to give 100% attention to the lesson, because part of their brain is busy trying to keep them safe. Consider hypervigilance when he or she is off task.

Emotional bodyguard: Some subject matter can make an adopted child feel vulnerable. Themes such as family and loss can stir up strong feelings. It may be difficult to completely avoid these triggers; this makes it even more important that you learn to 'read' the child so you can adapt material and intervene early.

Generalisations don't help: Be careful about assumptions regarding why a child acts a certain way. Adopted children have experienced trauma early in their lives, and the effects can be varied and difficult to understand. Adoptive families give children the best chance at recovery, but the effects of neglect or abuse don't simply disappear. While some children may appear



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independent and standoff-ish, others may act younger and depend on you to help work out problems, manage their emotions, and provide supervision during unstructured times.

Getting praise right: Be measured in how you use praise. Some adopted children struggle with a deep sense of shame. If your praise is too exaggerated, you risk not being believed. Be on the lookout for something the child does well, perhaps creativity in solving a problem or sticking with a difficult task. You may need to help them experience success by providing opportunities in less academic activities.

Listen to the parents: If parents tell you they are concerned about their child's over-familiarity with adults, for example, or that their child's behaviour deteriorates after school, take them seriously. Speak with parents about strategies that are suitable to use in school. They are likely to have had input from social workers and therapists.

Management that works: Adopted children often have difficulty regulating emotions. It is not simply a case of the child not following rules; sometimes it is just that they can't –yet. Like younger children they still need the adult to help regulate emotions. Ditch the traditional behaviour charts especially where there is an element of public shame. Become an expert in how you manage the classroom. For example, think about how to get everyone else settled and working, so that you can give extra attention to the child who walks into your classroom and isn't ready to learn.

Protect the home: It is easy to put too much strain on the relationship between parents and child by frequent reporting of negative behaviours at school. One of the things that helps a child settle in class is when home life is happy and stable. Teachers' comments about a child may make the parent feel that they are responsible to 'fix' the child's behaviour at school. That burden may be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

Relationships support learning: Think of your relationship with the child as the scaffolding that gives him or her the confidence to learn. As with any relationship, learn to 'read' the child's behaviours. Becoming fidgety, louder, or non-communicative may be tell-tale signs that a child is not coping.

Shame-less: Avoid being punitive in your approach to discipline. This will often lead to an adopted child feeling a sense of worthlessness. Think of discipline more as a way to help the child learn to trust that adults are competent. Some behaviour may make you feel de-skilled and draw you into personal conflict. The child will probably need your help to repair the relationship.

Tricky transitions: Schools are full of transitions, for example, within lessons, class to playground, and in the dining room. These are particularly difficult for some adopted children and can trigger anxiety leading to difficult behaviours. You may need to find an alternative place for the child away from the crowd. This is also the time when the child needs more supervision.

Visit the Adoption UK websites www.adoptionuk.org.uk/Scotland and <https://adoption.scot/> or call our helpline on 0300 666 0006.



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Scotland@adoptionuk.org.uk



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