Pupils emerge from the sensory room calm and ready to learn

Adoption-friendly schools

Annie Grant visits a primary school to learn how adoption-friendly practices are transforming the experiences of pupils with attachment disorders

It's mid-morning at St Mary's Church of England Primary School in Twickenham, and in a small sensory room, away from the hustle and bustle of classrooms, a teaching assistant sits on the floor, reading aloud.

After a while, a young boy creeps out from a small silver tent in the corner of the room. He moves a little closer to the teaching assistant, then nearer still, until TA and pupil are shoulder to shoulder, sharing the story.

The pair had transferred to the chill-out room, with its calming lighting and smell of lavender, after the pupil, an adopted child, became distressed, crying and lashing out, too overwhelmed to continue

with the lesson. Once there, the boy crawled into the tent, surrounding himself with cushions and sensory objects, only emerging a little while later, drawn by the lure of the story.

Meeting the needs of adopted children

The provision of a sensory room and other calming spaces across the school are some of the visible indicators of the school's drive towards becoming an adoption-friendly school, where pupils with attachment disorders feel safe, supported and able to learn.

According to PAC-UK, an independent adoption support agency, school is a major source of stress for adoptive

families and their children, who often struggle to get the support they need because adoption is commonly assumed to be a 'happy ending' now that the child has a permanent loving home.

'The reality is very different,' explains Emma Gore Langton, author of *Becoming an adoption-friendly school*. 'The abuse, trauma and loss that adopted children experience when they are very young has a lasting impact on their brains and on their psychological, emotional and cognitive development. Children's emotional, social and mental health needs are a significant barrier to their learning.'

'Adoptive families tell us that adoption-friendly practice in schools can make all the difference to their lives,' she continues. 'There is growing evidence that meeting a child's emotional needs improves achievement, behaviour and wellbeing as well as reducing time out of class and the use of sanctions and exclusion.'

Changing school culture

St Mary's Primary School's journey towards establishing an adoption-friendly culture began with a twilight training session for class-based staff, led by PAC-UK, aimed at raising awareness and understanding of the effects on children of early trauma, loss, and attachment difficulties.

'It was incredibly helpful,' remembers headteacher, Angela Abrahams. 'Not only did it help us to see the behaviours of our adopted children with new eyes, it also provided the impetus for us to look closely at all aspects of our practice and to minimise potential triggers for pupils with attachment difficulties.'

With three adopted children in school and other pupils exhibiting behaviours consistent with attachment disorder, the short training course left staff wanting to know more. So Mrs Abrahams and her colleague, SENCO Ruth Knight, enrolled on a six-day PAC-UK training course, Becoming an Adoption-friendly School, which ran over six months.

The course builds on participants' knowledge of attachment, trauma and loss, and supports them to develop whole-school approaches that meet the needs of children with difficult early life experiences. Schools that attend the training are asked to commit two people – either two members of staff, or a member of staff and an adoptive parent – to attending every session.

'It was a huge investment to release two senior members of staff for six days, but it was important to us and it supported our school development target to enhance

the caring aspect of our practice,' says Mrs Abrahams. 'Changing the culture of an organisation requires consistent effort over a long time and if you're not on the senior leadership team your power to effect change is limited.'

Course format

The course, and the book and resource pack that support it, are structured around the adoption-friendly schools charter (see box below), which was formulated in response to a PAC-UK online consultation asking adoptive parents, school staff, virtual schools and other professional stakeholders to describe what an adoption-friendly school would be like.

'Becoming an Adoption-Friendly School is an action-based course with each session focusing on one of the points in the charter,' explains Dr Gore Langton. 'Each session finishes with delegates identifying two or three action points for their setting in relation to that day's topic and then, during the first hour and a half of the next session, they report back on what they changed, what worked and what didn't. We don't want people to come on a six-day course and for nothing to happen.'

'That's really valuable,' agrees Mrs Abrahams. 'The action points keep you focused between sessions and then you discuss what you've done with the whole group, so you're constantly reflecting and improving practice.'

Task force

Course delegates are required to set up a small task force back at school, with specific, time-bound responsibilities to help create a more adoption-friendly school over the period of the course. PAC-UK recommends that, ideally, the task force should include people who are:

Adoption-friendly schools charter

As an adoption-friendly school, we work hard to:
- identify children's needs
- prioritise relationships
- respond empathetically to behaviour
- work in true partnership with parents
- share information sensitively and effectively
- reflect and protect adoptive families
- support our staff
- use our resources wisely.

We don't always get it right, so we try again.

Becoming an adoption-friendly school by Emma Gore Langton and Katherine Boy.

Angela Abrahams (left) and Ruth Knight (centre) discuss adoption-friendly practices at one of the training days

- committed and motivated because of a personal or professional interest
- powerful enough to make changes from the top
- involved enough in the day-to-day life of the school to model the changes they want to see
- connected enough to win the hearts and minds of others in the school.

> ❝ *Working in partnership with adoptive parents has been a vital part of the school's strategy* ❞

Mrs Abrahams sees the school's task force as a powerful driver of change. 'It includes a broad range of stakeholders, from adoptive parents and a member of staff who is adopted, to interested and committed staff and professionals who work with our adopted children,' she explains.

'Each member of the task force has a designated role,' adds Ms Knight. 'One teacher is responsible for helping staff to review the curriculum to identify anything that could prove challenging for adopted children. Another is leading a review of the behaviour policy, someone else is researching external sources of support.'

Progress

Through the work of the task force, St Mary's has made huge strides towards being an adoption-friendly school.

'Some things have been very simple;

our application forms and home visits are now planned to give us as much information as possible about adopted children before they join us, so we can be fully prepared,' explains Mrs Abrahams.

Other changes have been far-reaching and fundamental. Staff have undertaken a complete review of the curriculum to identify anything that could prove challenging for an adopted child.

'Christmas is a good example,' says Mrs Abraham. 'We talk about the birth of a special baby and the bond between mother and baby, but if you've been placed for adoption as a baby, that can be a very difficult message to hear. In history, children do a topic about themselves and, as part of that, they bring in photographs of themselves as babies. In Year 6 they learn about genetics. When you stop and think about the impact those topics could have on particular groups, it's quite an eye-opener and you need to handle them really sensitively.'

The behaviour policy has also been reviewed. PAC-UK points out that systems of rewards and sanctions commonly used in schools assume that children are in control of their behaviour, but many of the behaviours of adopted children arise from

A teaching assistant and a pupil share a story in the sensory room

feeling unsafe and under threat. Systems that punish children for behaviours that they can't control can compound the damage to children who are particularly sensitive to threat and shame.

'In the light of that, we no longer use our usual behaviour charts with vulnerable children,' says Ms Knight. 'Instead, we have more personalised behaviour plans in place and monitor their behaviour in different ways, focusing on building the skills they need to self-regulate.'

Working with parents

Working in partnership with adoptive parents has been a vital part of the adoption-friendly strategy at St Mary's and is already bearing fruit.

'There has been an arc of improvement, from crisis, to understanding, to managing,' comments one adoptive mother. 'The school now realises that it's more about managing my son's anxiety, rather than managing his behaviour. If you manage his anxiety, his behaviour will naturally improve.'

'We see adoptive parents as the most fantastic resource,' says Mrs Abrahams. 'You glean from them what works at home and use that in school, so you've got that consistency. And you find out what a child really enjoys because often engagement comes through that route.'

The focus on attachment has helped staff to develop empathy for adoptive parents. 'When every day is a challenge, you can lose sight of just how vulnerable the child and their adoptive family are because it is hard to see beyond the way pupils behave,' observes Mrs Abrahams. 'The training has kept the child and their family in sharp focus. When we communicate with parents now, we do it empathetically, balancing the negatives with positives, because sometimes it is just too much for them to hear only how difficult the day has been.'

'The most positive thing has been understanding,' agrees an adoptive mother. 'You take on this little bundle of complexities that a birth child wouldn't always have, and you don't know what is going to evolve, so working as a team has been really helpful. I give the school feedback and receive feedback in return and we're constantly tweaking the nurturing around my son.'

Supporting staff

St Mary's has planned a dynamic team around each adopted child, providing more support from educational psychologists and learning mentors when needed, and stepping back a

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Why focus on adopted children?

Adopted children are one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

- As many as 75% are exposed to alcohol in the womb, creating lifelong neurological and cognitive consequences (Gregory, Reddy, Young, 2015).
- 74% experience abuse and neglect at the hands of their birth families. They learn the world is a frightening place and that the adults they depend on to meet their needs are unpredictable and unsafe (NICE, 2013).
- Once in the care system, adopted children live with foster carers for an average of two and a half years, with only 0.3% experiencing a single, stable placement.
- Many adopted children are separated from their siblings (Selwyn, Wijedasa, Meakins, 2014).

At school, adopted children are:
- less likely than their peers to achieve age-related expectations at Key Stage 2
- less likely to leave school with five or more GCSEs
- more likely to have special educational needs
- more likely to be excluded.

Adapted from *Becoming an adoption-friendly school* by Emma Gore Langton and Katherine Boy.

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little when things are going well. The school is mindful too that staff need to be emotionally resilient to work with very challenging pupils and has put arrangements in place to support them.

'Working with really challenging children can be incredibly intense,' says Mrs Abrahams. 'Opportunities for respite are important for their wellbeing.'

The playground has small planted areas for children who prefer a quieter playtime

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To this end, the school has set up a 'reflection room' decorated in calming colours with comfortable sofas for staff or parents who need a break. 'If things get too much, they can just go in there for a few minutes, close the door and it doesn't feel anything like school,' says Mrs Abrahams.

Support staff's time working with challenging children is also managed by limiting the number of hours they work with a particular pupil each day.

'Sometimes you just need to let someone else take over for a while so everyone can breathe,' says Ms Knight. 'We don't have formal supervision, but during periods of crisis the senior team will check in with staff two or three times a day and give them a break if they need it.'

Wider benefits

Back in the sensory room, it's nearly lunchtime and, with the story over, the little boy who was in the tent is settled, relaxed and ready to return to the classroom and continue his learning. The use of reading aloud to calm and re-engage troubled children is just one approach that is shared between home and school and is typical of a new way of working for St Mary's.

'We're thinking about children in a very different way now,' explains Mrs Abrahams. 'I think it's important for every school, regardless of whether or not they have adopted children, to reflect on their practice, because they will all have pupils with anxiety or attachment or mental health issues, and the culture of the school can make such a big difference.'

'The changes that this school has made make it stand out,' concludes one adoptive parent. 'It has made such a difference to our children, and what is good for our children is good for all children.'

Annie Grant is a freelance consultant, producer, writer and editor

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FIND OUT MORE

- ***Becoming an adoption-friendly school*** by Emma Gore Langton and Katherine Boy: http://bit.ly/sc242-22
- **PAC-UK education services:** www.pac-uk.org/education
- **PAC-UK resources:** www.pac-uk.org/education-resources
- ***Children in care – more than a label:*** *Special Children* 241
- ***Why you shouldn't treat all children the same:*** *Special Children* 235