

Adopted children and the transition
from primary to secondary school:
an examination of pupil, parent
and teacher views



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Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

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- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

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Adopted children and the transition from primary to secondary school: an examination of pupil, parent and teacher views

Hampshire Educational Psychology Service 2009



Abstract

Adopted children and the transition from primary to secondary school: an examination of pupil, parent and teacher views

This research focuses upon the impact that the transition from primary to secondary school may have on adopted children, and the role schools could play in supporting adopted children during this time.

Questionnaires were sent to adopted children and their adoptive parents: 20 parents and 11 children returned questionnaires. The questionnaires focused on attitudes towards the transition from primary to secondary school, the needs of adopted children compared to other children and the role of schools in supporting adopted children.

Following the questionnaires, a focus group was held with six adoptive parents and then interviews with four secondary school teachers. The interviews and focus groups had seven key areas:

- sharing information
- curriculum issues
- the perceived needs of adopted children
- the transition process
- pastoral support
- homework
- training for schools.

Both parents and children alike felt that adopted children have additional educational needs, particularly around issues of self-organization. However, adoptive parents were often unclear about who to talk to in their child's school, and how to ensure that information about their child's adoption was subsequently passed on to all appropriate members of staff. Equally, schools were generally keen to support adopted children, but often had poor channels of communication for ensuring staff were well informed. Additionally, some teachers revealed a lack of awareness regarding the needs of adopted children and the types of support that might be useful. However, where school staff had worked closely with parents and other agencies, such as the Educational Psychology Service and the Post-Adoption Service, parents and pupils reported helpful outcomes. This would suggest that working with other agencies may be particularly useful in enabling schools to gain a better understanding of the needs of adopted children, and allow them to take a more proactive approach in offering support to these children.

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Hampshire Educational Psychology Service 2009

Introduction and aims of the project

This report focuses on the transition of adopted children from primary to secondary school. The aim of the research was to consider the concerns and difficulties that might be faced by adopted children at secondary school, by collating the views of adopted children, adoptive parents and school staff. A secondary aim was to gain an understanding of what adopted children and their parents think is important for schools to know about when adopted children move to secondary school, and to consider what measures might need to be put in place in order to address these issues.

Context

For most children, transition constitutes a 'major milestone' (McGee et al. 2003: 13), thus it is unsurprising that children, and their parents, may find this a challenging time. Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999) reported that most children experience difficulties as a result of adjusting to new routines, losing old friends, and coping with a variety of new teachers and different expectations. In line with this, Evangelou et al. (2008) found that worrying about bullying, workload, making friends and having different teachers were all linked with a poor experience of transition. Moreover, they reported that 72 per cent of children in their study did not settle well following the transition to secondary school.

Reassuringly, for most children, these initial difficulties tend to be short-lived (Galton et al. 1999). Nevertheless, it seems likely that some children may find this time particularly challenging. Children who have been adopted are a case in point. There is indirect evidence to support the view that adopted children may be particularly susceptible to problems during the transition period. Collishaw, Maughan and Pickles (1998) suggested that separation from birth parents lends children a 'psychological vulnerability'. More specifically, it is well documented that early loss or trauma can result in attachment difficulties which can have 'profound implications on the child's ability to function to his full potential within both home and the school environment' (Allen 2008: 2). Until recently, a common assumption was that those children placed for adoption later in childhood were more likely to experience problems than those who were placed for adoption as babies. However, it is now widely accepted that all adopted children may be vulnerable to experiencing behavioural and emotional problems, regardless of age at adoption (Howe 1997).

The problems adopted children may experience are wide ranging and can have an impact on educational attainment. For example, Howe (1997) reported that adopted children face difficulties concentrating and often show poor academic performance, which in turn results in impatience and frustration. More recently, Behen, et al. (2008) attempted to pinpoint the factors which might underlie poor academic performance in these children. They examined the impact of early deprivation on adopted children and found that just under half experienced

difficulties in executive functioning¹, language and/or memory. Moreover, although some recovered, others experienced lasting impairments in these areas. Behen et al. suggested that such impairments may arise as a result of many factors, including pre- and post-natal damage, stress and a lack of appropriate environmental experience. Vorria et al. (2006) found similar results; those children who spent the early part of their lives in residential care before being placed with adoptive families revealed greater cognitive deficits compared to other children who had been raised in a stable birth family setting. Additionally, Vorria et al. found that adopted children also experienced difficulties in understanding other people's emotions. In line with these findings, advances in neuroscience are providing increasing evidence for changes in brain structure and function linked to early deprivation (Glaser 2000, cited in Allen 2008).

Such findings are important when considered in the context of transition. Compared to primary school, secondary school life requires considerable organization on the part of the child as they are faced with frequent changes of teachers, classes and subject areas. Additionally, the move to secondary school involves losing friendships, and making new ones, thus the ability to relate to others becomes particularly important. The fact that adopted children may experience greater difficulty in these areas than birth children suggests that the transition period may be particularly challenging for these children, and raises the possibility that additional support structures may be needed from a variety of sources. Consequently, this issue is the focus of the current study.

Methodology

Data were collected in three different ways:

- (i) An initial questionnaire was sent to adoptive parents and their children
- (ii) A focus group was conducted with six adoptive parents
- (iii) Interviews were carried out with four secondary school teachers.

Questionnaires to adoptive parents and adopted children

Questionnaires were sent by the Post-Adoption Service, along with the quarterly newsletter which goes to all adopters on the team's mailing list². Participants were invited to complete either a paper or on-line version of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were devised to generate topics for discussion during the focus

¹ Stirling (2002, cited in Allen 2008: 5) defines executive functions as a 'raft of psychological attributes that are supervisory, controlling and organizational...the ability to plan, initiate and terminate actions, to think in abstract or conceptual terms, to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond in socially appropriate ways'.

² This method ensured that the researchers did not have access to the personal information of the parents. Although the project was specifically concerned with those children in Years 6 to 9, the Post-Adoption Service was not able to identify this group, thus all parents (n=635) received a copy of the questionnaire, but only those who came under the project's criteria were asked to respond.

group and interviews. A range of issues were covered (see Appendices A and B), including:

- attitudes towards the transition from primary to secondary school
- the needs of adopted children compared to other children
- the role of schools in supporting adopted children.

In total, 20 parents and 11 children (five girls, six boys; mean age = 12 years) returned questionnaires. Along with written parental consent, the only personal information requested was the child's initials, date of birth and age at placement. However, parents were given the option to provide their child's contact details so that a book token could be sent in recognition of their participation³.

Table 1 Summary of demographic information provided by parents (n=20)

Current age of child	12 years 6 months
Age when placed for adoption	2 years 8 months
Age when adoption order made	3 years 7 months

Focus group with adoptive parents

The questionnaires also invited parents to form a focus group to discuss the issues in more depth. This was taken up by six parents. The focus group addressed seven key areas (see Appendix C for details):

- sharing information
- curriculum issues
- the perceived needs of adopted children
- the transition process
- pastoral support
- homework
- training for schools.

³ The offer of a book token was phrased as a 'thank you' for time and effort to ensure that it was not seen as a 'bribe' to take part.

Interviews with school staff

Finally, interviews were conducted with designated teachers for looked after children and/or transition managers from four secondary schools. These staff members were chosen as they were considered most likely to have involvement with adopted children during the transition period. Initially, schools were randomly selected to take part but, due to a poor response, one school was chosen because staff were known to be researching effective school practice around transition. The teacher interviews addressed the same seven key areas as the focus group (see Appendix D).

Findings

The results of the questionnaires, focus group and interviews are presented below under the seven key headings. Direct quotes are indented.

Sharing information

The questionnaires indicated that parents tended to be open with other people about the adoption (mean = 4.13, where 1 is not at all open and 5 very open). All but one had informed the school and, in general, their children were happy for this information to be shared. Parents chose to inform a range of people, including the head teacher, form tutor, head of year, and the special needs department. Most reported that they had informed the school simply so that teachers would be aware should an issue arise, although some parents were keen for teachers to take a more proactive approach and offer specific forms of support. In general, parents felt that informing the school had been beneficial. However, a minority experienced negative consequences, such as hostility from other parents, teasing from some children and a lack of understanding from teachers.

Most parents within the focus group were keen to be open with their child's school, but confusion existed in terms of who to speak to, and how to ensure that this information would be passed on to relevant staff. Parents were vague about what they expected would happen as a result of sharing their child's adopted status, other than to trust it would be handled sensitively.

'What is tricky for us is that [child] is just starting secondary school...who needs to know and who doesn't need to know?'

'How does that information get to teachers, how do you make sure the right person knows that information?'

Widening the responsibilities of the designated teacher for looked after children to include adopted children was perceived favourably by all parents.

'It would have been really helpful to be able to go and talk to somebody designated to look after my son's type of need...and who is then going to disseminate that information throughout to the right people...'

'It would be a wonderful thing if the looked after children person also became the adopted children [person]. You could then give them the amount of information they need.'

This issue was also explored during the teacher interviews. In general, schools did not have lists detailing which children were adopted; indeed, most only knew this information on an ad hoc basis. It was more common to hold lists of 'emotionally vulnerable' children and, sometimes, adopted children would be subsumed within this. While some schools were open to keeping records of adopted children, one school questioned its purpose:

'Why would you think that that list needed to be kept in the first place, and what's the point of singling them out?'

Equally, schools were keen to avoid 'prying' into what was perceived to be families' private business:

'It's down to their own business, isn't it?...Adoptive, you think that it's a family setting and they're done and that they're fine.'

None of the schools had a person who co-ordinated support for adopted children, although one school had a 'key worker' system where each child had a key member of staff with whom parents could liaise regarding pastoral issues. Such a system provides a useful way of overcoming the issue parents faced of 'who to speak to'. Schools were open to talking to parents; however, the methods for disseminating this information to other members of staff were varied. Some schools took a reactive approach, informing staff as and when issues arose, whereas others took a proactive approach, informing staff at the outset of needs to be aware of.

'If an issue came up and it was relevant to the situation then perhaps the relevant members of staff would be informed...We don't formally go around and say "this child is adopted". It's a...need to know basis, it's a response to a situation.'

'Yes, I have done [told other teachers] because it has been a way of explaining some of the issues they have.'

It needs to be noted that many parents only informed schools about their child's adoption so that teachers could act should an issue arise, thus those schools who took a reactive approach were operating within these parameters.

Although schools were generally vague about how information from parents was managed, several had established links with feeder schools and viewed these links as an important way of obtaining information about pupils entering their school. Some secondary schools liaised with primary schools during the transition period

to ensure that vulnerable children were identified and any relevant information was passed on. In these cases, schools often had structures in place for informing other teachers. One school had a 'transition book' which was passed round to all teachers at the start of Year 7. This book contained information about all new children coming into the school, including whether they were adopted (if this had been made public). Another school operated a similar system, using email:

'We do get internal emails to all teaching staff that new children are arriving...and then any further information from that is available on a need to know, case-by-case basis...if that child was going to be under our direct supervision or care, then we can get access to more information through the school welfare.'

Curriculum issues

One reason why it might be particularly important to share information with other teachers is to ensure that teachers are aware of potential curriculum sensitivities. A number of potential pitfalls were raised by parents in the focus group, such as being asked to bring in baby photos, producing family trees, and covering topics such as genetics, drugs and alcohol. Other less obvious pitfalls were also raised:

'an incident where they were talking about moving house, why people move house, and he absolutely lost it, he came home in floods of tears...to be fair to the teacher, it is not something you would put two and two together, but at that time he absolutely could not deal with that.'

This issue was put to teachers. They listed subjects such as PSHE and Religion as liable to raise potentially sensitive areas, and were able to give examples where the curriculum had been altered:

'When I was in the primary sector years ago, history included family history, but that was scrapped because some children can't do their family tree...I taught history last year to Year 7s – they don't do it...We do a local study on the school here...We don't do it on personal family history.'

It was also emphasized that teachers should be aware that particular areas could be deemed sensitive to certain pupils:

'As a teacher, whenever you are introducing something, you are always thinking about what potential pitfalls it might throw up.'

Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that mistakes could happen and that this was something to learn from:

'It's being sensitive. Class teachers can become tremendously embarrassed because they have made a big booboo. I've done it in the past...If you know what's before you, you can do things that avoid that embarrassment. So being forewarned...'

Such comments highlight the importance of ensuring that all members of staff are aware of potential difficulties that might arise. In general, teachers were receptive to the idea of a designated teacher for adoptive children who could be responsible for liaising with adopted pupils, their parents and teachers:

‘I would absolutely agree. Since you phoned me, I’ve been thinking more and more about it, thinking...they’ve got exactly the same issues as looked after children.’

However, the (potentially misguided) point was raised that not all adopted children would require the support of such a teacher:

‘It seems fine. But I think you’d want to split up the category of adopted...for those children who are adopted at birth or adopted so early on that there isn’t any issues with dysfunction, I don’t see...what support we could offer them.’

Such responses highlight the lack of awareness surrounding the impact of *in vitro* and early post-natal damage, and the fear of separation, feelings of rejection and memories of abuse that may be experienced by adopted children regardless of the age at which they were placed with their adoptive family.

Perceived needs of adopted children

One role of the parent and child questionnaire was to pinpoint areas where adopted children might have different needs to other children, with a view to directing the subsequent focus group and interviews. Parents were asked to rate their child’s needs in a variety of areas compared to their peers, while pupils were asked to rate their own needs, again compared to their peers (1 equals not at all different, 5 very different; see Table 2).

Table 2 Perceived differences between adopted children and their peers

	Parent rating	Pupil rating
Feeling good	2.84	1.89
Learning to the best of ability	2.32	2.33
Having a go at new things	2.37	2.33
Organizing self and belongings	3.42	2.44
Making new friends	2.84	2.89
Keeping friends	3	2.56

Getting on with adoptive family	2.17	2.00
Getting on with school staff	2.05	2.56
Getting on with other adults out of school	1.89	1.78
Knowing who to talk to about worries	2.47	3
Accepting rules and boundaries at home	2.68	2.11
Accepting rules and boundaries at school	2	2.44

There were no areas in which parents were unanimous that their child's needs were identical to those of other young people their age, nor was this the case for the children. However, it must be noted that in the absence of a comparison set of birth parents and children, it is not possible to tell whether such views are common to everyone, or specific to adoptive parents and their children; it may be that all parents/children feel that their needs differ from those of other children. Indeed, a common anxiety among parents at the focus group was whether their child's behaviour was normal for any child or whether it was a function of their adoption.

'I find it very hard to know if [child] is finding it awkward to get on with others, is that because [child] is a bit awkward, or is it because [child] is adopted?'

'Sometimes it's just a phase they are going through, it's not necessarily because they are adopted.'

Teachers tended to agree that it was difficult to generalize, suggesting that support should be tailored to individual children:

'I would say like any "normal" child you can't generalize, that's why we have PEPS [personal education plans], that's why we have IEPs [individual education plans].'

Nevertheless, some common issues did arise from the questionnaire responses. Both parents and children felt that adopted children had additional difficulties making and keeping friends. This is likely to have a particular impact during the move to secondary school as children lose old friendships and make new ones. A further issue that emerged strongly from parents in both the questionnaire responses and the focus group was the issue of organization, and the difficulties adopted children sometimes faced in this area.

'I have tried every organizational thing...It is now a mega thing because he just won't let us help him.'

'It is the impulsive nature. Without the stop and think.'

Problems with organization were felt to impact particularly on adopted children's ability to complete homework, and this issue will be considered in more detail later in the report.

The issue of (dis)organization is particularly pertinent to the main focus of this report – the transition from primary to secondary school. Secondary school requires more self-organization than primary school, and might therefore be expected to pose particular challenges for adopted children. The impact of transition was subsequently explored in more depth by the questionnaires, focus group and interviews.

Preparation for transition

First, adopted children were asked about their feelings about the move to secondary school. As Table 3 illustrates, pupils were generally excited about the prospect of secondary school, citing the opportunity to make new friends and experience different types of lessons, such as drama and art. On the whole, they were not overly concerned about the transition, although they were aware that their parents were concerned. Where concerns did exist, they related to bullying and having different teachers, as well as having to tell people that they were adopted.

Table 3 Pupil views about transition

	Mean rating (1=not at all, 5=very much)
Are/were you excited about moving up to secondary school?	3.60
Are/were you concerned about moving up to secondary school?	2.10
Are/were your parents concerned about you moving up to secondary school?	3.00

Those children who were already at secondary school reported mixed experiences of transition. Just over half stated that they felt stressed at the start of secondary school, attributing this to the number of people in their new school, difficulties getting to lessons on time, the increase in homework and the volume of new material to remember. Those who felt stressed reported that their parents, and sometimes their teachers, were aware of this. In order to explore this further, pupils were asked to provide examples of the types of things that had helped (or not helped) during the move to secondary school; this was subsequently followed up in more detailed discussions with parents and teachers. Table 4 provides a summary of the children's responses. Pupils were also asked for their 'top tips' for various people involved in the transition process, and these are included in Appendix E.

Table 4 Adopted pupils' perceptions of useful forms of support during transition

	Things that helped	Things that didn't help
Things I said or did	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling teachers I was adopted • Not telling everyone I was adopted • Keeping a map of school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggling to get on with teachers • Having a disorganized/ messy room
Things my parents said or did	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering help and encouragement (with homework/organization) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complaining about lack of organization
Things my friends/other pupils said or did	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering support • Peer mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking difficult questions about family • Friendship break-ups • Bullying
Things school staff said or did	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding weekly support meetings • Helping to prepare for secondary school • Encouragement and praise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shouting at me

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the questionnaire results revealed that parents were more concerned about their child's transition than the child (mean = 3.82). In line with pupil responses, parents reported concerns relating to bullying, the size of the school and the lack of consistency of teachers, in addition to more specific concerns relating to the difficulty their child had in coping with change and their poor organizational skills.

Despite these concerns, parents were generally happy with the level of support provided by their child's school during the transition period and some were impressed by how well their child had coped:

'We were really worried...actually he has done remarkably well.'

Several did, however, report incidences where the school had been unhelpful. In one case, the school had been slow to act until there had been educational psychologist involvement and in a second case primary school staff would not include parents in the transition meeting with the secondary school.

The questionnaires, focus groups and interviews subsequently explored the specific forms of support provided during various stages of the transition process. Table 5 provides a summary of the types of transition support provided. More

specific forms of support offered throughout secondary school will be considered in a later section.

Table 5 Summary of the types of transition support provided

	Type of support
During Year 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visits from secondary teachers to primary schools • Taster days at the secondary school • Parent information evenings • Liaison between schools to identify vulnerable pupils • One to one support for vulnerable pupils
During Year 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First day of school open to Year 7s only • Special lessons at the start of Year 7 • Peer mentors from older year groups

In general, parents were split between whether the support their child had received went over and above what would normally be offered to a birth child. Some perceived that they, and their child, had been offered more sensitive support because the school knew that their child was adopted. Others, however, felt that the measures were the same as would be offered any child. This was not necessarily perceived to be a bad thing – parents felt that schools treated children individually and would respond to them appropriately according to their particular needs, regardless of whether they were adopted.

This view concurred with that outlined by teachers. Most teachers suggested that they worked with primary school teachers to identify vulnerable pupils, but that additional measures would only be put in place during transition if a child was perceived to be in need of extra support, but not purely because they were adopted⁴:

‘If anyone is flagged up to me as being emotionally vulnerable...I then have a team of advocates who would then go into some of the lessons of the Year 7s as they arrive...do some observations and just touch base as to how they are getting on.’

‘In the case of one child last year we were contacted through an external agency and then we had a meeting with the [primary] school, and then what we did was to create a TAC immediately, because once he was going to leave primary school he needed some support here, so we instantly jumped on that.’

⁴ This theme continued when teachers were asked about more general pastoral support and will be addressed in more detail in the following section.

Closely linked to the issue of transition support is the issue of more general pastoral support. The type of pastoral support that might be particularly helpful for adopted children throughout secondary school was subsequently discussed in more detail with both parents and teachers.

Pastoral support

Several parents at the focus group highlighted the excellent pastoral support that had been provided by particular members of staff.

‘The main point for him in the first year was the school nurse. He went there every time he had a problem...she knows my son inside out.’

Additionally, regular contact from key members of staff – either through email or through review days or review books – was considered to be particularly helpful. Often, such systems were put in place for all children, not just adopted or vulnerable children. More specific strategies were also welcomed by some parents, such as the use of buddy systems and stamp systems:

‘The one thing that seems to be a really positive thing for him is we do a review day...Every subject, every week, they tick five good things and five bad things, what things he can improve on, what things he has done really well...Then we can sit down “well, why are you having problems here?”’
‘We have tremendous support from the school...He didn’t cope with break and lunchtime at all, he would find someone to go and have a fight with, and the other thing was whenever he had to move classroom he frequently didn’t arrive to where he needed to be. We ended up with a little card with a stamp on it, so at break time he could do an alternative. They also created for him a playground and lunchtime timetable as to where he was supposed to be...That was fantastic of them.’

A key issue to emerge from the teacher interviews was that teachers felt it was important to provide *all* children with good pastoral support, based on their individual needs, rather than specifically target adopted children:

‘Without those two things [the PEP meetings and an educational allowance that looked after children receive], an adopted child will receive the same level of pastoral support and educational support that everyone gets. Most schools try to work in a way that no child is left unsupported...it’s not that we’re under-supporting adopted children...but that we’re bringing up the support of everyone, so that it’s individual and targeted.’

Nevertheless, some schools suggested that adopted children might need specialist input:

‘I think they’re entitled to any support that’s out there...it’s not a level playing field and some of us need that additional input.’

'I think they just need to know that you're on their side...very clear boundaries...second chances...they need to feel secure...you have to be, as a teacher, really vigilant about that side of things...you have to unpack what's going with those individuals.'

As highlighted previously, the issue of disorganization was perceived to be particularly problematic for adopted children. Parents in the focus group suggested that this had an especially detrimental impact on their child's ability to complete homework:

'He had remembered he had art homework so sits down...He reads the first line and then – “right, I have to go and do a drawing” and he hasn't bought a pencil, [he] gets one pencil, comes back...Then – “I need to go and get a rubber” – then after about fourteen journeys backwards and forwards, getting all different things...we say “I think you should read the instructions” – and it will say something completely different.'

Such findings are in line with research which suggests that adopted children may experience difficulties in self-organization and planning. Consequently, the teacher interviews focused on this issue, and how it might be addressed within a school setting. None of the schools were aware that adopted children were especially susceptible to these problems, and some suggested that such difficulties were common to all children. Nevertheless, most were able to suggest support structures that could be put in place:

'We probably wouldn't be aware of it as that was the reason why [they were struggling with homework]...because no one's obliged to inform us whether they're adopted...We've got a child who is not adopted but who had changed from living with one parent...so he was assigned a support worker who meets him in the morning before school starts for 10 minutes...that person also sees him in a couple of lessons during the week and targets are set for him about developing his organization.'

'I can think of a whole class...that have got similar problems and I have actually got round that by writing to the parents and letting them know the long-term homework task.'

Training for schools

Finally, the role of training for schools was examined. Parents were in agreement that schools should receive additional training on supporting adopted children, either through initial teacher training or through on the job support. Materials developed by Adoption UK and Family Futures were particularly popular with parents and they recommended that these be disseminated throughout schools. One parent had arranged for a school visit by a Post-Adoption Service member and perceived this to be particularly effective, not only in educating her son's school, but also in highlighting the severity of her son's needs:

‘That has been wonderful, it has given me a form of kudos – this is not a neurotic mother who is whinging about her poor little boy, this is somebody who is talking about a serious issue, and it is serious enough for somebody to come in and give a presentation about it.’

In general, teachers had received limited training on adoption issues and were receptive to the suggestion of additional training, particularly in terms of attachment theory, and the role of loss and grief and its links to behavioural problems, as well as legal issues relating to adoption:

‘I always like revisiting stuff on attachment theory. I think it’s so vital...And maybe understanding some of the process to adoption...and when to talk about things and when not to...I think people will sometimes walk on eggshells around them, “you can’t say this”. So I suppose I just think it would be useful to share that with other people.’

Nevertheless, one school raised the point that they had had limited training on looked after children and that this would have to take priority over training on adopted children:

‘I’d like them to give me some looked after children training! That would be a nice start! I had one through a little while ago but it was over £300...It sounds harsh, but I’d only be drawn to it [training on adoption] if there was a national statutory requirement I had to live up to, because resources are tight – we need to do what we must do first, and then move onto the shoulds, and then the coulds. At the moment, as a school, we’re dealing with the musts and the shoulds...the coulds have got to wait.’

Such a response is telling and indicates that any training offered in the future would do well to incorporate the needs of adopted children within a more generic training programme focusing on looked after children.

Implications for practice

The findings raise a number of important points, and highlight the need for integrated working among various individuals and agencies. In general, parents and children felt that the support they had received from schools had been very good. However, there were a number of exceptions where children had felt stressed and parents had felt that additional support would have been helpful. Teachers were, on the whole, sympathetic to the needs of adopted children, but revealed a lack of awareness regarding the potential impact of adverse early life experiences on a child’s subsequent social, emotional and cognitive development, suggesting that they might benefit from additional training. The aim of this final section is to outline the key points to emerge from the research, and draw out implications for practice.

Sharing information

The issue of sharing information about a child's adoption was a concern for both parents and schools. Parents were generally unanimous that schools should know about their child's adoption, and their children were usually happy with this decision, but confusion often existed over who to inform and what would happen as a result. Schools faced equal challenges. Teachers were happy to talk with parents who volunteered information about their child's adoption, but did not always have good pathways of communication to ensure that such information would be disseminated to all relevant staff. Additionally, teachers did not always hold a clear understanding as to why this information should be disseminated. This raises several implications for practice.

Firstly, the results suggest the need for improved communication among professionals *within schools*. The teacher interviews highlighted the fact that information sharing systems were not always established or used effectively; teachers tended to know which children were adopted in an ad hoc, rather than systematic, way. One school used a transition booklet to provide teachers with information about children joining the school, and this appeared to work successfully; this is a useful way of working and could be adopted more widely. Nevertheless, systems would still need to be in place to ensure that information provided *post* transition was passed on. Secondly, there needs to be improved communication *between* primary and secondary schools. Some schools had systems for working with primary school staff to identify vulnerable pupils and provide additional support at transition for these pupils. Such systems focused on emotionally vulnerable children, rather than adopted children, but could be taken on by all schools to ensure that important information, including details about a child's adoption if relevant, is passed on at transition.

The above recommendations rely on communication both within and between schools. While such communication is important, a further way of addressing this issue is to ensure that staff are sensitive to the needs of *all* children and hold an awareness that family configurations can be diverse. During the course of this research, parents and teachers highlighted the fact that children come from different backgrounds and family circumstances, regardless of whether they are adopted – thus teachers should always be cautious when teaching potentially sensitive subjects. Nevertheless, the experiences of the children reported by their adoptive parents suggest that this aim is not always achieved. One recommendation, therefore, is that it may be useful for schools to re-visit the importance of diversity, with due consideration to specific curriculum topics, to enhance staff sensitivity to the needs of all children.

Additionally, in some cases, schools were wary of being overtly nosy into other people's lives and did not perceive it to be their 'business' to know whether a child was adopted. A useful approach might therefore be to ensure that particular staff, such as those responsible for providing pastoral support, know which children are adopted. In contrast, it may be sufficient for other members of teaching staff to know that a child in Year X is adopted, without needing to know which child. Such an approach would ensure that a sensitive attitude was taken to the curriculum, but

would overcome some of the perceived difficulties associated with sharing personal information.

Providing support: at transition and beyond

Another key issue to emerge was that schools were loathe to offer pupils additional help simply because they were adopted, preferring to offer a personalized approach to supporting every student within the school. While such an approach has merits, it is an inherently *reactive* approach and dictates that support is provided only after problems emerge. In some senses, this is in line with the wishes of adoptive parents; the majority stated that they simply wanted their child's teachers to be aware of the situation so that they could act appropriately if an issue arose. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that adopted children are more likely to develop a range of difficulties relating to organization and concentration (Behan et al. 2008; Vorria et al. 2006), which may go on to impact on their educational achievement. Moreover, the increased social and academic demands of secondary school compared to primary school suggest that such difficulties might be more likely to emerge following transition. It therefore seems sensible for secondary schools to offer a more proactive approach, aimed at pre-empting, and consequently minimizing, the emergence of such difficulties.

It was clear from the teacher interviews that, while teachers were keen to learn more about the subject, it was an area that few had considered in any detail. Thus, future work should seek to increase teachers' awareness of the issues surrounding adoption. The results of the current research suggest two possible routes to achieving this, both of which involve integrated working between schools and outside agencies. Several parents highlighted the positive contributions that had been made from other agencies – in particular, the county's Educational Psychology Service and the Post-Adoption Service. In one instance, a parent reported that an educational psychologist had been instrumental in working with their child's school to put in place additional support. In a second instance, a parent reported that the Post-Adoption Service had visited their child's secondary school and provided information to staff. In both cases, the parents reported that the intervention had changed the school's perception of their child's needs in a positive way. Such evidence suggests that closer links between schools and these agencies might offer a useful starting point for schools that are struggling to know how to support adopted children.

A useful remit for both the Educational Psychology Service and the Post-Adoption Service might therefore be to work together with schools to raise awareness. Recently, the county's Adoption Service has redrafted an information booklet for teachers regarding adopted children in school, highlighting attachment, behaviour and curriculum issues, with suggestions for strategies and support from schools. The results of the current study suggest that it would be useful to complement this booklet with training sessions. Such training would need to include work with looked after children, in addition to adopted children, both to ensure funding, and to secure interest from all schools. It would be particularly useful for this training to

focus on educating schools on the research evidence around the impact of early trauma and attachment needs, as well as facilitating discussion around how best to offer well-informed pastoral support, sensitive curriculum delivery and consistent classroom management.

Equally, there may be a role for the Educational Psychology Service and the Post-Adoption Service in working together with families and schools to initiate transition planning. Parents indicated that they were often unsure who to approach at their child's school, and what support was required; the input of the Educational Psychology Service and/or Post-Adoption Service could provide a useful way of helping adoptive parents during this time. One way of addressing this might be to promote the use of a recognized format for transition planning and review for children whose needs may not necessarily reach statutory statement criteria. This would provide a means of clarifying and sharing an adopted child's needs, and enable an agreed set of strategies to be developed prior to school transfer.

Conclusion

In summary, the transition period was perceived to be a difficult time by both adoptive parents and teachers. Adopted children were less concerned, although several reported that they found the initial few weeks of secondary school stressful. Both parents and teachers were committed to ensuring that adopted children were well supported, but teachers did not always perceive adopted children to have additional needs and were often unclear on the type of support that might be helpful. This points to the need for greater awareness and training, with a view to enhancing schools' communication with external bodies, such as feeder schools, and with parents, as well as internally, with other teachers. Increasing levels of awareness of this area will help to provide schools with firmer ideas surrounding the type of support that might be useful, and ultimately provide a better network of support for adopted children.

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Appendix A
Adoptive parent questionnaire

Parent Questionnaire

If you have more than one child, please complete a separate questionnaire for each child.

Information about your child

Child's initials :

Child's date of birth: ____/____/____

Child's gender: Boy ☐ Girl ☐

Age of child when placed for adoption:

Age of child when adoption order made:

Current school year:

What type of school does your child attend? (please tick)

Mainstream school in Hampshire	<input type="checkbox"/>	Special school in Hampshire	<input type="checkbox"/>
Independent school in Hampshire	<input type="checkbox"/>	Any type of school in another authority	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do any of the following apply to your child? (please tick)

School action	<input type="checkbox"/>	School action plus	<input type="checkbox"/>	School action with statement	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Other people's awareness of your child's adoption

- 1. On a scale of 1–5, how open are you with other people (outside of your immediate family) about your child's adopted status? (please circle)**

1	2	3	4	5
<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 15px; width: 100%;"></div>				
I think carefully before telling anyone, few people know			I am very open about it, most people know	

Please explain (give reasons for) your answer:

- 2. Have you made your child's school aware that your child is adopted? (please circle)**

Yes/No

If yes, please answer question 3. If no, please answer question 4.

3. a. If yes, who did you tell? E.g. tutor, head teacher.

b. How did you expect school staff to act upon this information?

c. Did school staff do anything with this information? If so, what did they do?

d. Have you had any negative experiences by sharing this information and, if so, what were they?

e. How did your child feel about this information being shared?

4. a. If no, what were your reasons for not telling school staff?

b. How happy are you with this decision and why?

4. Do your child's needs in the following areas differ compared to those of other young people their age? (please circle)

	No different to their classmates		Very different to their classmates		
	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling good about themselves	1	2	3	4	5
Learning to the best of their ability	1	2	3	4	5
Having a go at new things	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing themselves and their belongings	1	2	3	4	5
Making new friends	1	2	3	4	5
Keeping friends	1	2	3	4	5
Getting on with their adoptive family	1	2	3	4	5
Getting on with school staff	1	2	3	4	5
Getting on with other adults out of school, e.g., football coach, youth leader	1	2	3	4	5
Knowing who to talk to about worries or problems	1	2	3	4	5
Accepting rules and boundaries at home	1	2	3	4	5
Accepting rules and boundaries at school	1	2	3	4	5
Do you have any further comments about any of these?					

Your child's transition from primary school to secondary school:

- 5. Are/were you concerned about your child's transfer from primary school to secondary school? (please circle)**

1	2	3	4	5
<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 15px; width: 100%; background-color: #cccccc;"></div>				
No, not concerned at all			Yes, very concerned	

Please explain (give reasons for) your answer:

Please only answer the following questions if your child is in Year 7 or above

- 6. Did your child experience any problems during the transition from primary school to secondary school? (please circle)**

Yes/ No

If yes, please describe these:

- 7. We are interested in the action (if any) taken by school staff to support your child during the following times:**

A. During Year 6, in preparation for transition to secondary school

- Did school staff (primary and/or secondary) do anything that was helpful? (please circle)**

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?

- Did school staff (primary and/or secondary) do anything that was unhelpful? (please circle)**

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?

- **What else, if anything, could they have done to support your child?**
- *Please only answer this question if your child's school was aware of their adoption. Did these measures go over and above what you would normally expect for a birth child? In what way?*

B. The early weeks of Year 7, at the start of secondary school

- **Did school staff do anything that was helpful? (please circle)**

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?
- **Did school staff do anything that was unhelpful? (please circle)**

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?
- **What else, if anything, could they have done to support your child?**
- *Please only answer this question if your child's school was aware of their adoption. Did these measures go over and above what you would normally expect for a birth child? In what way?*

C. Subsequently through Key Stage 3 (Years 7 to 9)

- **Did school staff do anything that was helpful?** *(please circle)*

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?

- **Did school staff do anything that was unhelpful?** *(please circle)*

Yes/No

If yes, what did they do?

- **What else, if anything, could they have done to support your child?**

- *Please only answer this question if your child's school was aware of their adoption. Did these measures go over and above what you would normally expect for a birth child? In what way?*

- 8. Were any other agencies/professionals involved in supporting you and/or your child at the time of transition?**

Yes/No

If yes, which agencies/professionals?

In what way did they support your child?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please return it to Dr Cara Osborne at the Research and Evaluation Unit, Educational Psychology Service, Clarendon House, Monarch Way, Winchester, SO22 5PW. If you have any queries about this evaluation, please contact Cara on (01962 876233) or cara.osborne@hants.gov.uk.

Appendix B
Adopted child questionnaire

Pupil Questionnaire

Adopted young people have made some big life changes already and have often experienced stressful times early in their lives. We are interested in finding out if this helps prepare them for managing the stress of starting secondary school, or if they find the change of school more difficult than their peers. We would like to know what can make the difference to a successful move to secondary school. We would be very grateful if you could spend some time answering the following questions.

Information about you

Your initials:

Your date of birth: __ __ / __ __ / __ __

Your gender: Boy ☐ Girl ☐

Current school year:

1. Are/were you excited about moving to secondary school? (please circle)

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all excited

Very excited

Was there anything you were especially excited about? If so, please tell us more:

2. Are/were you concerned about moving to secondary school? (please circle)

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all concerned

Very concerned

Was there anything you were especially concerned about? If so, please tell us more:

3. Are/were your adoptive parents concerned about you moving to secondary school?

1 2 3 4 5

Not at all concerned

Very concerned

Was there anything they were especially concerned about? If so, please tell us more:

4. Do you think your needs in the following areas differ compared to those of other young people your age? (*please circle*)

	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> No different to my classmates Very different to my classmates </div>				
	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling good about myself					
Learning to the best of my ability					
Having a go at new things					
Organizing myself and my belongings					
Making new friends					
Keeping friends					
Getting on with my adoptive family					
Getting on with school staff					
Getting on with other adults out of school, e.g., football coach, youth leader					
Knowing who to talk to about my worries or problems					
Accepting rules and boundaries at home					
Accepting rules and boundaries at school					
Do you have any further comments about any of these?					

Please only answer the remaining questions if you are in Year 7 or above.

5. Starting secondary school can be stressful because there are so many changes to get used to.

Did you feel stressed? *(please circle)*

Yes/No

Please tell us more about this if you want to:

If you felt stressed, please answer question 6. If not, please continue straight to question 7.

6) a. Did people at home know you were stressed? *(please circle)*

Yes/No

If yes, how did they know?

6) b. Did people at school know you were stressed? *(please circle)*

Yes/No

If yes, how did they know?

**7. We would like to know what things have helped you at secondary school.
Please provide any examples you can think of, and explain how they helped you.**
(Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary).

Things you said or did:

Things your parents said or did:

Things your friends said or did:

Things other pupils said or did:

Things school staff said or did:

8. We would also like to know what things have made it difficult for you at secondary school. Again, please provide any examples you can think of, and explain how they made it difficult for you. *(Please continue on a separate sheet if necessary).*

Things you said or did:

Things your parents said or did:

Things your friends said or did:

Things other pupils said or did:

Things school staff said or did:

9. What are your top tips for the following people about moving to secondary school?

An adopted pupil

My top tips are:

An adopted pupil's parents

My top tips are:

Teachers of an adopted pupil

My top tips are:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please return it to Dr Cara Osborne, Research and Evaluation Unit, Educational Psychology Service, Monarch Way, Winchester, SO22 5PW.

Appendix C

Parent focus group questions

Parent Focus Group Discussion

1 Sharing information [10 minutes]

Questionnaire responses about sharing your child's adopted status with school raised the risk of wanting the information to be used 'sensitively', rather than as a negative 'labelling' of the child.

When is the time when it is helpful for people to know that your child is adopted? Who do you think the key people in school are to tell? Or not tell? How much do they need to know? What do you hope they'd do with the information?

- **What does 'sensitive support' mean? What would you hope a teacher/school would do with the knowledge that a child is adopted?**
- **Are there any circumstances when having a label of 'adopted' might be negative or unhelpful? (do parents have specific examples of this?)**
- **How would you feel about your child's name being on a school-held list as an adopted child, alongside children still in care?**
[If the school's designated teacher for LAC also had responsibility for adopted children, this would be the case]

2 Perceived differences [10 minutes]

There was great variation in the reported differences of adopted children compared to their peers (but only a small sample so far).

- **Is it possible to make generalizations about adopted children's needs? (or does it depend on the child?)**
- **Which areas do you think might be important to focus on and why? [A4 copies of question 4 to hand as prompts]**

3 Preparation for transition [10 minutes]

- **Do you have any examples (or wishes) of helpful preparation provided by primary/secondary schools? Why was that helpful in achieving a smoother transition? What was of particular benefit for your child?**
- **What do you think about a transition meeting to focus on your child's particular needs before changing schools and plan with the receiving school how they are going to be addressed?**

4 Curriculum changes [10 minutes]

Both parents and pupils gave some examples of awkward moments during topics like ‘my family tree’ covered in school. We’d like to hear more about this:

- **What are the curriculum-based activities/topics that need particularly sensitive handling for an adopted child/young person?**
- **Do you have any examples of good practice to share? Do you have any examples of bad practice – if so, what would you suggest teachers offer as an alternative activity?**

5 Pastoral support and discipline [10 minutes]

Pastoral support and discipline procedures can vary greatly between schools. Several parents and pupils mentioned the need for ‘good support’.

- **What might this ‘good support’ look like?**
- **What discipline approaches are helpful for an adopted child? Why do you think that is?**
- **What approaches are particularly unhelpful? How do you understand this?**

6 Homework

Homework was mentioned as a particular stress point for young people and their parents once at secondary school. Do you have any ideas for how this could be handled differently?

7 Top Tips [10 minutes]

Young people were asked to give their ‘top tips’ for other adopted pupils, their parents and teachers.

- **What ‘top tips’ would you give?**

[Time permitting, write individually, share as a whole group, scribe on a flipchart, give pens to parents and ask to come up and put a tally next to their top 3 tips?]

8 Training for schools [10 minutes]

Several parents mentioned the need for training and support for teachers.

APPENDIX C – Parent focus group questions

- **From your experiences, what would be helpful for schools to know and be able to do in order to support your child well? How could this best be offered?**
- **Eg. a meeting to discuss your individual child's needs, a training day for a whole school staff on attachment issues etc?**

Appendix D
Teacher interview questions
Adoption and Transition Project: Teacher interview prompts

General intro – the issue of adopted children and their transition from primary to secondary school hasn't received much attention in the past. The aim of this interview is to gain some insight on this issue from a school perspective.

1 Sharing information

- Is it normal practice for people (teaching staff) to know who the adopted children are in your school? Do you think you know who they are? [Do you keep a list? Is it on their record?]
- What would be your response to a parent sharing such information? [What would you do with the information?] Why? What would be a good response? Is there any particular person you would make a point of telling? Why?
- During the focus group, adoptive parents suggested that there could be a designated teacher for adopted children, as with looked after children. What do you think about that?

2 Perceived differences

- Should adopted children be treated any differently to birth children? [will probably come out in the previous section]. Should they be treated the same/different to looked after children?
- Is it possible to make generalizations about adopted children's needs? (or does it depend on the child?)
- Which areas of need do you think it might be important to focus on and why?

3 Preparation for transition

- What are your school's general procedures for supporting children during the transition from primary to secondary school?
- Would you do anything different/additional for an adopted child?
- Have you come across IPA (Inclusion partnership agreement)? If yes – have you used it and how did you find it? [If no – then leave at this]

4 Curriculum changes

APPENDIX D – Teacher interview questions

- Are there any curriculum-based activities/topics that need particularly sensitive handling for an adopted child/young person? What might you offer as an alternative curriculum activity?
 - Only offer prompts if none are forthcoming. E.g. family tree, genetics, baby photos, drug/sex awareness
- Acknowledge that the interviewee won't be involved in teaching all subject areas – how might you ensure that other colleagues were aware of the situation?

5 Pastoral support and discipline

Many of the parents we spoke to described the good support they and their child had received.

- What type of support do you think might be helpful for an adopted child?
- What discipline approaches are helpful for an adopted child? Why do you think that is?
- What approaches are particularly unhelpful? Why do you think that is?

6 Homework

Research has shown that adopted children can experience difficulties around organizing themselves and forward planning.

- Do you think this has implications around homework? Is this something you would be aware of as a teacher?

7 Training for schools

- What training, if any, have you/other people in school had in relation to adopted children/the transition period?
- Do you have any training planned for the future? Do you feel it would be useful to have more training? If so, what would be useful if more training were to be offered?

Appendix E
Pupil ‘top tips’

PUPIL ‘TOP TIPS’

Pupils made the following suggestions:

To adopted pupils:

- Secondary school isn’t as bad as it sounds – don’t worry about it
- Only tell trusted friends about adoption – keep some information to yourself
- Be yourself and smile – be proud and confident
- Talk to your friends and family
- Be nice to your teachers
- Have someone to help you get organized

To an adopted pupil’s parents:

- Offer support, encouragement and praise, but not pressure
- Check your child’s feelings and progress in school
- Listen to your child

To teachers of an adopted child:

- Talk to child in private and listen
- Offer support if asked for
- Treat adopted children the same as other pupils
- Be sensitive and understanding

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