

Many adopted children have communication difficulties because of their experiences before birth and early on in life. Please read this booklet to better understand the needs of adopted children in your school.

We want **you** to know about:



Five key things adopted children need **you** to know...



1. We might have difficulty paying attention and this is not our fault. Our brains might have developed differently because of our experiences.



2. We need to build relationships with you to feel safe and communicate at our best.



3. Keep your language simple. Avoid sarcasm and other tricky forms of language (e.g. idioms, inference).



4. Social communication is really hard for some of us, so we need help to make and keep friends.



5. Routine and predictability is important for us to feel safe. This will help me to communicate better.



Adoption
East Midlands

DERBY NOTTINGHAM DERBYSHIRE NOTTINGHAMSHIRE



Speech, Language and Communication



The Basics: Early Interaction

Communication and Attachment are intertwined. Attachment begins in the womb and communication develops even in the very early days, weeks and months of life. Babies and children learn what words mean by adults noticing how they are feeling, understanding what they need, and commenting on what they are experiencing. Babies learn that when they communicate (by crying) they are responded to and their needs are met.

When a baby's needs for interaction, food and comfort are met, they avoid feeling overwhelmed and their brain is free to learn.

Babies are brilliant at communicating, but that communication depends on reciprocity. They need a carer who is sensitive, attuned to their needs and able to respond to them. This is often not the case for the early experiences of adopted children.



If carers don't make repeated eye contact, speak, or offer connection – babies will not learn to interact well. They might seem less interested in people, not learn how to interact or take turns.

If things do not go well with attachment and communication early in life, or if this is disrupted, it can have longer term impacts on a child's communication development.

Many adopted children have experienced trauma. This impacts on their sensory development, their understanding of the world, and how they communicate at school.

We need you to be empathetic, curious and flexible, to help them meet their potential in school.

Speech, Language & Communication

It can be helpful to think of communication skills as a pyramid, where foundation skills help other skills to develop.



This handbook focuses on some of the main areas of difference that have been highlighted by our families.

Speech & Fluency

Talking

Understanding

Social Communication & Interaction

Attention & Listening

Attention & Listening

Have you noticed that the adopted child in your class...



Seems to 'zone out' and does not listen to what is said, then does not get started with the task?



Does not pay attention to the adults, focusing instead on interacting with peers?



Has difficulty focusing on any task for longer than a few minutes?

This might be because..

- Many adopted children have difficulties with attention and listening. This is due to the way their brain has developed in response to their early experiences, including in utero.
- There are many sensory triggers for an adopted child that can set off a fight/flight/freeze response in a child's primitive brain. When a child is stressed or 'checked out' they cannot take in or process information
- For a child to be able to hear the adult they need to feel calm and safe. The connection and relationship with the child is key to developing a sense of safety for an adopted child.
- Adopted children may hear and not respond or they may hear and not attend – due to poor attachment, feelings of not being heard, of not being worthy, or of shame.
- Early experiences can impact on children's ability and willingness to tune into language and communication with adults. Their understanding of communication and its use are couched in the context of their early experience.

You can help by...



Developing a relationship with the child. They will be aware of what you feel about them and your responses to them. Feelings of safety and belonging will help them to engage.



Talk to parents about potential triggers for the child's fight/flight/freeze response. This might be volume/tone of voice or body language



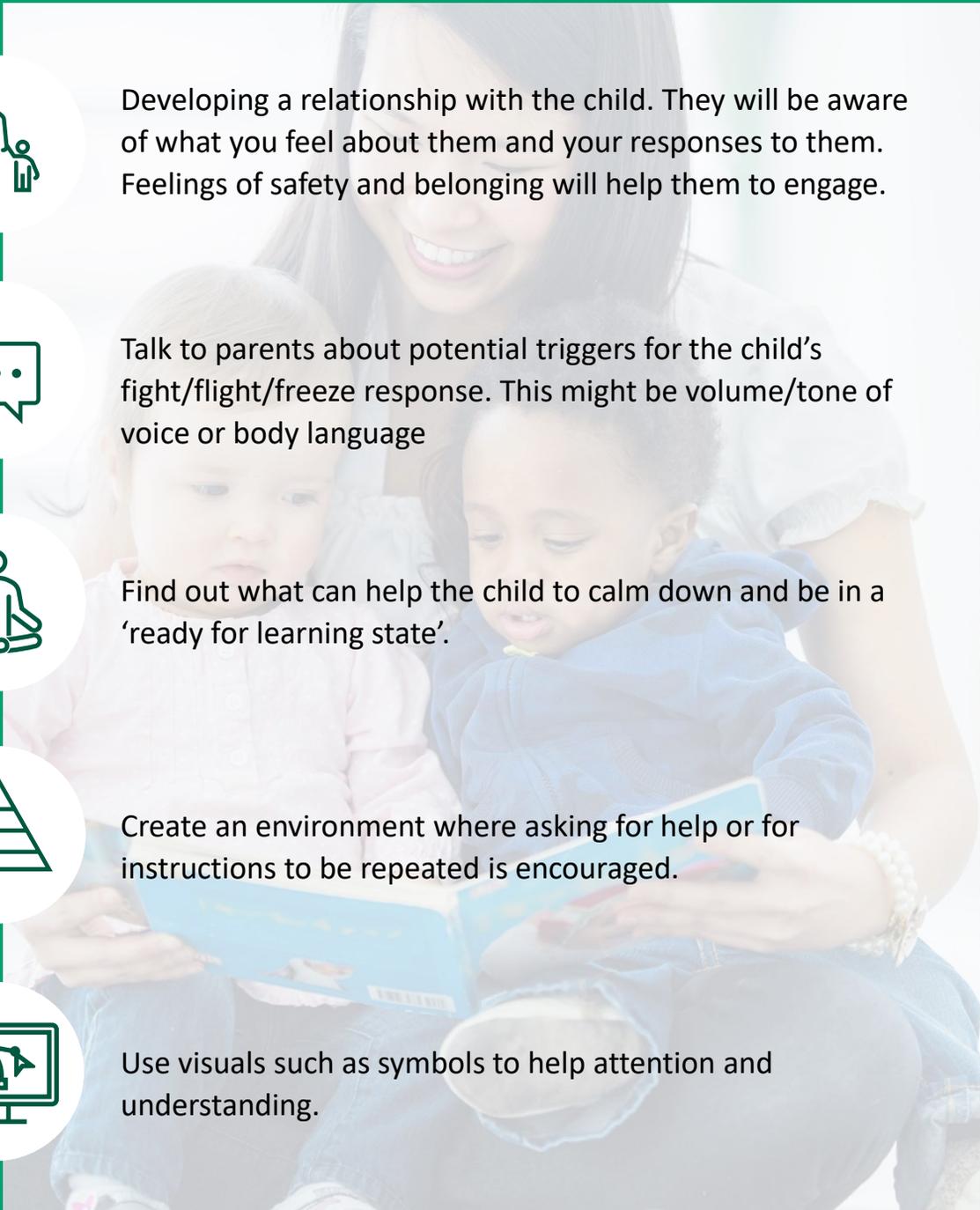
Find out what can help the child to calm down and be in a 'ready for learning state'.



Create an environment where asking for help or for instructions to be repeated is encouraged.



Use visuals such as symbols to help attention and understanding.



Social Communication & Interaction

Have you noticed that the adopted child in your class...

- Struggle to adapt how they talk to people, e.g. adults vs. peers?
- Does not seem to understand the social 'rules' and can behave in unusual ways?
- Sometimes does not behave in the expected way in conversations? They might: find it hard to take turns, talk too much, not talk enough, or interrupt others.
- Use humour differently, either being slow to understand what is funny, or working too hard to make people laugh?

- Use eye contact and facial expression in an unusual way?
- Has trouble understanding what other people or thinking or feeling?
- Use eye contact and facial expression in an unusual way?



This might be because...

Children who were not talked to may not understand how to begin, maintain or end conversations. Pragmatic skills are learnt through exposure and practise; we need to be aware that adopted children's experience of this will be different.

How a child is interacted with in their early life influences their understanding of social interaction. Children who are neglected do not have the early experiences of eye contact and 'turn taking'.

Be aware that the child might not have skills in inferring what other people might be thinking and feeling. Their early brain development and early attachment experiences will not have supported this level of development.

This [video](#) provides a helpful demonstration of how a child's early experiences can impact on their social interaction skills. UK trauma video about child development and the brain:

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Some children who have experienced maltreatment struggle to adapt their communication to different people and situations. They may not have learnt that this is important or may not be aware that how they are communicating is seen by others as unusual.

Some adopted children may have experienced adults responding negatively when they show signs of unhappiness or discomfort. They may mask how they are feeling as they have learnt this is safer. Other adopted children might make themselves more noticeable, so that they cannot easily be 'forgotten' as this has been safer for them.

You can help by...



Use visuals such as symbols to help attention and understanding.



Try to look behind the behaviour and understand why a child might interact or behave in this way, in the context of their experiences. Talk to parents to get a better understanding



Some children are keen to play and interact with peers but need some adult support to help with this. Semi-structured play opportunities like LEGO Therapy can support this, but only if this is something the child wants to engage in.



The child might have more difficulty repairing miscommunications or difficulties in relationships with other people and this should be treated with support and sensitivity.



For some children it can be helpful to be explicit about what you are thinking, feeling, or intending to do. Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations can be a helpful visual tool for this Social stories and comic strip conversations (autism.org.uk)

Understanding

Have you noticed that the adopted child in your class...



Has difficulty following instructions in class?



Struggles to understand sarcasm and takes things literally?



Has more difficulty understanding language than their peers?

This might be because of differences with early language development.

Children's exposure to language in the very early years affects their development. Language does not develop in a vacuum and poor exposure to language, for example in neglect, impacts on language and learning abilities. Children who have been adopted may have gaps in their language development.

Many adopted children have experienced stress in their early lives. Stress shuts down listening and learning, which affects a child's ability to focus and process words. If a child in class is experiencing overwhelm, they will struggle to take in new information.

Symbolic or higher-level language will be more difficult to understand as it is not easily 'mapped on' to what can be seen and experienced. Some children may find this level of language very confusing.





Language Meaning & Trauma

A child's understanding of words may be different to your own due to how that word has been used with the child. For example – 'secrets'. For the general population secrets can be fun and connecting, as they might generate excitement or a shared experience. An adopted child may have been told to keep secrets about abuse that is happening to them. Secrets are therefore scary and relate to adult intent to dominate and control in a frightening way.



You can help by...



Do not assume understanding. A child might give the impression that they understand what has been said, when actually they do not. Adopted children can be very good at 'masking'.



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Talking

Have you noticed that the adopted child in your class...



Has gaps in their vocabulary?



Find it hard to share ideas?



Struggles to talk about events and stories in the right order, including all the key information?



Cannot always explain how they are feeling, or use emotions vocabulary to the level you'd expect?

Vocabulary and language difference might be because...

Exposure to language is key to developing language. Children need opportunities to learn words and practise using talking for a range of functions. Trauma and posttraumatic overwhelm can make it difficult for children to attend and learn new word.

The 'critical window' for language development is 0-5 years. Many adopted children have experienced several changes of carer during this crucial period which affects their attachment and language.



Some children who experienced chaotic or unpredictable early lives have difficulties with narrative (sharing stories) and sequencing. These might have difficulty with cause and effect, find it hard to tell a story in the correct order, or might give disjointed accounts of events. Children learn narrative from early experiences of adults explaining what has just happened or talking about events. Adopted children may have missed out on some of these experiences.

Difficulties with body state and emotions vocabulary can be because of early experiences:

Children who have experienced trauma will have sensory memory. This is where the body remembers but the thinking brain can't remember. This means that children may respond different to sensory input. i.e. not knowing when they feel hot or cold or not recognising feelings of hunger. Find out more about sensory memory here at:

www.beaconhouse.org.uk/resources



Some children who have been adopted have difficulty reaching out when they are experiencing pain, due to early experiences of not having their needs responded to sensitively.

Babies and children learn the words for their body states (e.g. cold, hungry) and emotions (e.g. upset, nervous) by sensitive, responsive adults noticing, attending to, and naming what they are experiencing. Babies who are neglected are unlikely to have had their needs noticed, met, and named. The experience of expressing a need and having it met is important for the development of the brain and for communication, and early experiences can impact on how feelings are experienced and how they are expressed



This can lead to difficulties with both...

Recognising sensations and emotions: a child who has experienced neglect may not have been fed when they were hungry. They may dissociate as a way to cope with the experience. This can mean that they experience sensory information differently and it can be harder to understand their hunger cues.

Naming sensations and emotions: Children who have experienced trauma may have difficulty naming how they are feeling in their body, because of dissociation and because these emotions were not named for them in their early lives. Some children may have difficulty understanding emotions or sensations that others talk about because they experience them differently.



You can help by...



Support children to develop their expressive language skills by expanding on their utterances.



Teach new vocabulary in a visual and interactive way.



Talk about events that are experienced, e.g. school trips. Use photos and put them in order, talking about what happened first, next and last.



Do not assume that the child is easily able to recognise their sensations or emotions, or to name them.



Work with parents/carers to understand how to recognise the child's cues and how they communicate their needs, or how to recognise them if they do not do this verbally



Some children benefit from adults talking to them about how they might be feeling (e.g. 'I wonder if you're feeling worried') however this is personal. Talk to the family about what they are doing at home and how this can be supported by school staff.



Talk about your own feelings and how they relate to body states



Speech & Fluency

Speech sounds are the ‘icing on top of the cake’ of language and communication development. It is important that the skills lower down the pyramid are developed to support speech. Stammering/stuttering concerns should be discussed with a speech and language therapist.

Some adopted children are neurodiverse. Neurodiversity includes ADHD, Autism and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). These children may need additional, specific advice to support their communication and learning development in school. These difficulties should be considered as well as their specific complex background.

Neurodiversity



For parents to fill in:

My child is _____

The three key things you need to know about how they are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

