**How to make your setting adoption-friendly**

**By Esther Cummins, Falmouth University**

In 2020-21, 2,870 children were adopted from care in England (DfE, 2021). With a pupil premium entitlement for each of these children as they reach school age, settings require support in helping them settle thrive in education. But there’s no handbook! I’m hoping that the following 10 strategies will help you support adopted pupils in your school.

**Prepare and plan**

Whether you have adopted children in your setting or not, be ready to welcome a new child. Consider your usual transition arrangements for your vulnerable children- can these activities be replicated ‘in-year’? Do you know who your virtual school contact is? Don’t wait to review your practice.

**Educate your staff**

Teacher education and training rarely address this subject in depth, meaning that your staff may be both inexperienced and ill-informed. This is not their fault! Look to build in regular mini-staff training sessions, with manageable actions such as reviewing student voices or learning new vocabulary.

**Work with the adoptive parents**

The child may present differently at home to at school. Just because a child doesn’t seem anxious, upset, or violent at school, doesn’t mean that they aren’t exhibiting these traits at home. Consider that the parent(s) may have insider knowledge that you are not aware of. Discuss events (such as Mother’s Day) and learning activities (like family trees or looking at baby photos) to see how appropriate these are for the child.

**Hear from adoptees**

Whilst adoptive parents know their children well, this knowledge is based on information they have been given and observations they have made. They may have insight into their child, but this understanding is not the same as a lived experience. The child themselves may have different interpretations of their life story. And it is *their* story; do they want to share it with their peers, or do they want to maintain privacy?

**Focus on individual stories**

No two children have had the same experience of adoption, even if they are birth siblings. Some children have memories of their birth home and foster carers, some have direct contact with their birth families, some have siblings in other homes… Make sure you know the child’s story to support their identity.

**Change your behaviour policy**

It might sound obvious to say we should avoid behaviour policies that shame and exclude children. However, it’s still something we should actively consider. Look to trauma-informed practices that use natural and logical consequences to support a child’s behaviour. These consequences could be rubbing off graffiti they wrote or moving to the end of the line when they pushed in, rather than writing a child’s name on the board or asking a child to permanently sit on their own. Focus on relationship and restoration as key principles.

**Avoid assumptions**

There are many myths about adoption that are unhelpful; these include ideas that all adoptees are orphans, or adopters are infertile. There are many narratives behind each adoption story, and there can be a mixture of joy and sadness within the stories. Think about whether it is appropriate to ask a question to the adopted child, and instead educate yourself by looking at the websites such as PAC-UK and Home for Good.

**Listen to your language**

Avoid terms such as ‘real mum’; it is more common to use ‘biological mum’. However, it’s best to check with the family, as phrases such as ‘tummy mummy’ are sometimes used. Don’t tell the child they are lucky – the adoption process can be traumatic for the child, and they don’t want to be told they are ‘better off’. Stay away from terms that see the child as an ‘overcomer’ who should be celebrated because of the ‘normal’ things they do.

**Increase representation**

Look at the subject matter that you cover, including the books that you read. Are different families represented? Is adoption a positive or negative part of the story? Consider that adoption is multi-faceted; children may be not adopted by heterosexual couples. Ensure that books don’t misrepresent today’s reality.

**Look beyond the adoption narrative**

Adoptees are more than adoption. They may have learning needs that need to be addressed- these should be dismissed because of trauma. Moreover, all adoptees have strengths, and these should be celebrated; not because they are adopted but because each of these children is as unique as a child who is not adopted.

My final point is simple; own your mistakes, apologise, and change your practice. Don’t worry that you aren’t perfect- the best support comes from those who are willing to learn.

**//Author bio//**

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