

## Supporting Young People who are in care or who have been adopted

### Information for Early Years settings

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#### REMINDERS FOR EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

1. All babies and children are individuals and it is essential to get to know them really well.
2. As far as possible, learn about the child before they start at the setting so that you understand their history, their likes and dislikes and how best to support them.
3. It is very important for the child to feel safe and secure in the setting. Consistent use of routines, structure and approaches can help this process.
4. A key person who can provide a secure emotional base for the child is essential.
5. Play and learning activities for the child should be based on their developmental stage (rather than their chronological age) as they may have missed out on some experiences.
6. 'Behaviour is communication' and may be a child's way of communicating about an unmet need. A child's fear response (for example) may be triggered by something in the setting which seems 'ordinary' to other people.
7. Keep information confidential between key adults and use discretion.
8. Contribute to and attend the child's Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings.
9. Monitor the child's developmental progress carefully and provide or seek additional support when needed.
10. Work closely with carers and professionals to ensure a joined-up approach to supporting the child.



## INTRODUCTION



Like all babies and children, those who are in the care of the local authority are individuals and should be treated as such. However, babies and children who are in care are likely to have experienced neglect, abuse or rejection and their early life may have been unsettled. Many children in care have also experienced separation from siblings and other close family members. This can have a huge impact on all areas of their development. Although this booklet will make reference to children who are in care, other children (for example those who have been adopted) may have had similar experiences, and the guidance in this booklet will also be relevant to Early Years practitioners as they plan to understand and support these children.



Early Years settings have a crucial role in supporting the development of babies and children who are in care. Early Years settings can be a consistent environment in a child's life providing a safe base, appropriate role models and opportunities for positive social relationships. Early Years settings can also provide structure and routine which may have been lacking elsewhere.

It is well documented that children who are in care are more vulnerable in the long term to being excluded from school, having poor academic achievement and reduced life chances compared to their peers who are not in care. However, where good support is provided as early as possible, many children go on to achieve success in all areas of life. We hope the ideas in this booklet can help Early Years practitioners to enable this.

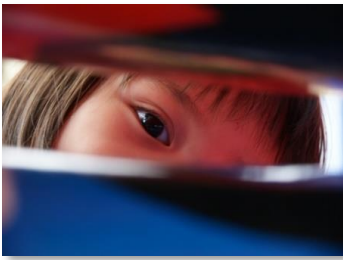


## THE BASICS

- Children who are in care are likely to be either accommodated under Section 20 of the 1989 Children Act, which is a voluntary agreement so that the birth parents retain parental responsibility, or through a Care Order under Section 31 of the 1989 Children Act which gives the local authority, in the main, parental responsibility.
- All children who are in care must have a Care Plan of which the Personal Education Plan (PEP) is an integral part.
- The Northamptonshire Virtual School is a team of experienced teachers and dedicated educational professionals. They promote and support the educational attainment and progress of Northamptonshire's children in care. The Virtual School's website can be accessed through [this link](#).
- Currently the Northamptonshire Virtual School ask Early Years settings to hold a PEP meeting and complete ePEP, an electronic education record, for all 2-year olds receiving free education, and by the term in which they turn 3 years of age, at the latest.
- In Northamptonshire, when a child is taken into care, a PEP meeting is arranged by the child's social worker, supported by the Virtual School. The social worker will invite other professionals such as staff from Early Years settings, carers and where appropriate, the child's parents or family members.
- The PEP is an evolving record of what needs to happen for a child who is in care to enable them to make expected progress towards fulfilling their potential. The Early Years Pupil Premium can be used to contribute to meeting the needs identified in this plan.
- It is important that the PEP reflects the child's individual likes, dislikes, feelings and wishes.
- The quality of the PEP is the joint responsibility of the local authority where the child is in care and the early years setting. Social workers, carers, Virtual School heads, designated teachers and, as appropriate, other relevant professionals need to work closely together.
- When a child in the care of the local authority starts to attend a setting, it is important for the setting staff to know which people are already involved with that child and how these people may be contacted. The child's social worker must give permission for the involvement of other agencies – for example an Early Years Portage Practitioner, an educational psychologist or a speech and language therapist.



## SETTLING INTO A NEW SETTING



Starting a new setting is daunting for most children and it can be particularly difficult for those who are in care. They may have already experienced many changes of settings, homes and carers and so missed out on the opportunity to develop a sense of stability. This makes it difficult for a child to cope in yet another new situation. When faced with change, some children re-experience past loss and trauma and may see change as abandonment. Early Years practitioners can support with the settling-in period by:

Having information about the child before they start so you are aware of their likes, dislikes and how best to support them.

Allowing additional transition visits if needed and gradually building up the amount of time spent in the setting.

Using transitional objects so that the child knows that they are being kept in mind and they will see their carers at the end of the day.

Allowing the child to bring their favourite toy or a comforter/soother so they feel safer and more relaxed. If the policy of the setting does not permit children to play with their own toys on site, perhaps a child's toy could be kept out of reach but in a place where the child can see it.

Being flexible about arrangements such as the time of day when the child comes to the setting. For example, for some children it may be helpful if they can arrive on site later than their peers, when the environment may be less busy.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH HOME

It is vital that Early Years practitioners and carers work together to support the child. This can be facilitated by:



Developing consistency between home and setting through the sharing of 'what works'.

Ensuring that the key person is the main point of contact for carers and communicates with them on a regular basis.

Although carers will need to know when there are concerns, there should be a strong emphasis on sharing the child's achievements and successes. As far as possible, details of concerns should be communicated when the child is not able to hear what is said.

Developing good communication and partnership with carers when putting strategies into place to teach and promote positive behaviour.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF KEY ADULTS



Having a key adult is important for all children in the Early Years but even more so for children who are in care. This is because they may not have had the opportunity to build a secure and trusting relationship at home. Therefore, it is important for the key adult to:

Provide a secure emotional base and be physically and emotionally available to the child.

Know about and understand the child's history.

Be a permanent member of staff in order to provide stability.

Be proactive in getting to know the child.

Make specific arrangements to spend quality time with the child. The child may not feel confident to seek this out themselves – it should be arranged for them.

Deliver any additional support (e.g. speech and language work) but if this is not feasible, the number of adults and location changes should be kept to a minimum.

## DEVELOPMENT OF SECURE ATTACHMENTS



Attachment Theory developed from the work of John Bowlby in the 1950s. He described attachment as the nurturing bond of physical and emotional love and care which is formed between a child and their primary care giver in the early years of development. This bond is central for a child's survival and well-being. Research indicates that the process of bonding begins before even before the child is born.

In the early years of life, babies depend on other people for physical and emotional support. Babies are born able to interact in ways which promote survival, protection and security (e.g. crying, smiling and sucking). A secure attachment develops when the primary care giver learns to recognise and respond to the child's needs - for example by giving eye contact, providing comfort, touch, or food or by playing with the child. This two-way relationship stimulates the production of bio-chemicals in the brain, which support emotional regulation and emotional intelligence. It is through secure attachment and nurture that children are helped to manage their emotions, develop trusting relationships and a positive view of self, others and the world, as they learn and grow. Some children who are in care will need additional support in



order to develop secure attachments because of difficult early-life experiences. Early Years settings and practitioners can support key areas of development through understanding specific needs and using these approaches:

#### 1. PROMOTING PERSONAL, EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Some children may be at a significantly earlier stage of social and emotional development than their physical age, due to factors in their early-life experiences. They may have had traumatic experiences and although they might not be able to use words to describe what happened, the experiences will have impacted on how the brain has developed and what these children have learned about the world around them. Children who have not had secure attachments with their care givers or who have experienced trauma and loss are likely to need particular support with their social and emotional development.



Therefore, it is important to:

Establish secure relationships to enable children to develop attachments with key adults who they know will respond appropriately to their core needs (e.g. food, drink, rest, stimulation, safety), be available for them, and listen to them.

Provide a safe base (a person and a place) where comfort and support are available so that the child feels safe to relax, explore their environment, and learn.

Model calm behaviours; adapt what is said to the child's level of understanding of verbal language.

Have shared routine activities following a similar structure each time - such as greeting, preparing food and eating, getting ready for activities together, tidying up and saying goodbye.

Engage in shared play and learning opportunities where adults model actions, provide verbal commentary and give structure when needed.

Value children's contributions, achievements, thoughts and feelings through noticing and sharing attention with them, and spending time with them and giving praise to promote a sense of competency and self-esteem.

Consider whether the child understands 'praise' and the association between their actions and the adult's response. It may be necessary to adapt the way a child is praised to take into account factors specific to that child.

Understand that behaviour is communication, and respond at the child's developmental level, putting feelings into words.

Give preparation and adjustment time for transitions, however small and routine, as these times may be particularly stressful.

## 2. DEVELOPING PLAY

It is important to give careful consideration to what is known about a child's early life experiences when planning play activities.



For some children play may be at the early level of face-to-face rhymes and actions, sensory and physical play and cause and effect activities. These children may just be learning that play is fun.

When faced with new or unfamiliar activities and equipment, a child may feel overwhelmed or over-excited. They may not know what to do and they may or may not want to have a go. Depending upon their experiences and feelings they may either try to avoid the situation or else 'dive in'.

Adults may need to provide a 'safe base' by encouraging and demonstrating, providing verbal commentary on activities and demonstrating connections between actions and spoken language.

Sustained attention, persistence and problem-solving develop through play, and in order to develop these skills, some children may need more time at play and more opportunities to see adults and peers modelling appropriate behaviours.

Modelling 'taking turns' and 'playing with' another person helps develop the foundations of social skills and friendships.

Involvement in imaginative play can help a child make sense of their experiences. It is important for the key person to be available to share the feelings of joy and satisfaction or to empathise with frustration or distress and so to put the feelings demonstrated into words in order to support emotion regulation.



### 3. DEVELOPING A 'SENSE OF SELF'



All young children are on a journey of developing what they know and understand about themselves (e.g. what they like or need and what motivates them). They are developing awareness of who they are and understanding of the feelings they have and what triggers those feelings. They develop this learning through how others interact with them, and so relationships are very important. For some children who have had less secure experiences, this journey will need to be more explicitly supported, for example by:

Providing positive shared experiences so children can explore what gives them enjoyment.

Modelling encouragement, providing smiles and specific praise about what they are doing.

Observing what they choose to play with most, joining in with their enjoyed activities and building on their developing interests to encourage them to explore more widely by combining their preferred toys with an activity they are less likely to choose.

Encouraging the child to bring favourite activities from home (if this is permitted by the setting) and share their interest with them.

Regularly sending home the things they have created (or photographs of them participating) demonstrating the link between home and the setting.

### 4. GETTING ON WITH OTHERS

When children become more secure in terms of knowing who they are, they become better able to begin to understand other people and develop the social skills of being able to share, take turns, play cooperatively, share attention in groups, see who they prefer to be with, and make friends. All of these social skills are built on finding out that it is fun to spend time with others and being able to trust and rely on other people. Some children may need more experience of explicit reassurance from supporting adults to help them learn about the 'give and take' of social situations. Key messages to be demonstrated include:





The child has not been forgotten when an adult is helping another child.

When they put down a toy and someone else plays with it, it is not lost; they can play with it later.

Some games are better when there are more children doing the same thing together.

Seeing what someone else does when it's their turn with a particular toy gives new ideas.

When playing a game together someone can go first and someone may 'win', and sometimes it will be them and sometimes it will be their friends.

## 5. MANAGING FEELINGS AND BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour is communication, often about an unmet need, so behaviour should be understood rather than judged, and responded to according to what a child may be feeling or what need is being expressed. For some children, everyday experiences may be interpreted as being threatening or stressful to them, so it is important to recognise and understand why the child may be reacting in a certain way, and then help them feel more secure in that situation. It is useful to remember the following:



Security is developed through relationships with key-workers, clear routines, children having their own spaces where their things belong, ensuring children know what is happening, and marking when things start and end.

Children need to know what their feelings are and so working towards teaching them the language of emotions is essential. This is important in context; labelling their feelings while they are experiencing them, giving them reasons why they may feel like that, and supporting them through the feeling if that is what they need especially when they experience 'a big feeling'.

Children take their cues from what the adults demonstrate so be clear about matching the full range of feelings words with non-verbal expression and actions, labelling causes and importantly showing self-regulation, reflecting rather than reacting, to give positive role modelling.

To help children be able to modulate and manage difficult emotions at moments of stress, they may sometimes need the non-verbal communication of touch and closeness (sitting on knee, hugs, rocking- according to the policy of the setting). This can trigger the release of the chemicals in their brain which reduces the intensity of these feelings. In order to recognise when the child will be helped by this support it is important to learn about the child and observe them carefully.

When soothed and reassured, shown that adults understand and can help them to understand what is happening and to feel safe, children will gradually take this on to develop the ability to manage the feelings themselves over time.

In the daily routine children may need to be shown and talked through ways to calm and relax - for example by having quiet time together or doing a calming activity by themselves. Ensuring that there is a balance of regular physical activity, with quiet times such as soothing stories, music and relaxation, teaches about the different ways their body feels and what they do can change this.

## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Caring for/about someone who has experienced trauma can be a complex and stressful experience in itself. Early Years practitioners should make use of the following:



Keep in mind that children continue to learn and grow every day and the care and nurture you are providing is making a difference.

Supportive supervision at work.

Know how to contact people who understand trauma.

Social networks and close confiding relationships.

## FURTHER READING

Golding, K.S., Fain, J., Frost, A., Templeton, S., and Durrant, E. (2013). *Observing Children with Attachment Difficulties in Preschool Settings*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Read, V. (2014). *Developing Attachment in Early Years Settings: Nurturing secure relationships from birth to five years*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Sunderland, M. (2016). *What Every Parent Needs to Know: Love, nurture and play with your child*. London: DK.