

Starting school - Creating a successful transition and a positive first year for Children in Care

Starting school for the first time is a big step in any child's life. Most children will experience some feelings of uncertainty or anxiety as well as curiosity and enjoyment when they first start attending school. Their ideas may also be influenced by what they have heard from their parents/extended family/carers and older siblings!

Children whose early life experiences have been unsettled or traumatic are likely to respond to starting school in ways which are different from other children of their age and whose backgrounds are more settled. Some children will be in the care of the local authority when they start school. They will be living with foster carers or Special Guardian and may have lived with more than one set of carers. Other children may have been adopted or the adoption process may be underway for them. Some children may have been in care but have moved back to live with their birth family.

Some children who are about to start school will have experienced high levels of stress. Not all stress is bad—for example, children need to experience manageable amounts of stress in the presence of supportive adults to develop a healthy stress response system. However, frequent or extreme experiences that cause excessive stress can effect a child's development and their emotional well-being in significant ways. They may show/experience/have emotional responses typical of children younger than their chronological age e.g. cling tightly, push away from people, cry, wetting themselves.

It can be useful to take a few minutes to think about the school environment and, in particular, the facilities for the children who are starting school for the first time. How might these be seen by a child whose early life experiences have been nurturing and supportive?

Now consider the same environment as it might be perceived by a child whose early life experiences have been unsettled and traumatic? This child may:

- have been hurt by adults and/or children
- have been ignored by adults
- have witnessed violence
- not have had their basic needs attended to consistently
- have spent time with several different adults and in many different places
- have learned to fend for themselves
- have learned to be wary of people and to watch out for what is going on around them
- be ready to try to get out of a situation which they don't understand or don't like
- be ready to lash out in response to situations they find difficult
- not know the words for feelings
- not be used to talking about how they feel
- not be used to seeking comfort or help from an adult
- have more difficulty than other children of their age regulating their own emotions and behaviour
- experience such a high level of stress that they find it hard to listen to and process what other people say to them.

It can be helpful to consider how such a child may respond to what they see, hear and smell in the school setting. What sense might the child make of what is going on? Of course all children are different but it is possible that some children may worry that they won't see their carer again. Others may behave as though they simply don't know what to do. Others may try to fend for themselves – grab something which interests them and push other children out of the way. Distress may be triggered in some children by things which relate to their early personal experiences – perhaps certain smells, noises in the setting or from outside – but they are unlikely to be able to explain this.

So what can be done to help in the school setting? The following are important:

- a careful transition process which allows as much information as possible to be shared carefully with everyone who needs to know
- a transition process which takes as long as necessary to allow the child to attend school without showing obvious signs of distress
- the development and maintenance of effective home-school relationships
- focussing on ways to help the child to feel safe
- allocate a keyworker to the child – a person who is able to provide emotional co-regulation
- remembering that the child may be 4 years old but behave in ways more typical of a younger child
- using approaches which match the child's level of emotional and social development rather than their chronological age
- including approaches which use sensory and physical experiences and avoid too much talking
- using routines consistently in school
- providing opportunities for the child to calm down if necessary or just to be quiet

Useful Contact

The Virtual School - Virtualschool@NorthNorthants.gov.uk

The Virtual School [website](#) has lots of valuable information. Several documents also contain the addresses of useful websites which provide information on how to understand and help children who have been through developmental trauma, showing features of ruptured attachments and difficulty regulating their emotions.