

**Transition into
Education for Newly
Placed Adopted
Children: **A Framework
for Decision Making****

Introduction

This guidance is intended to assist families, social workers, and education professionals in making decisions about a positive transition into nursery or school after a child moves into their adoptive placement. Discussions about educational transitions often occur before adoption transitions. After a child joins an adoptive family, there may be additional discussions, where professionals or families might feel pressure from themselves or others to arrange nursery or school placements soon after placement. Children remain under local authority supervision at the start of their adoptive placement, subject to additional monitoring regarding their education. We encourage all parties to prioritise the long-term best interests of the child.

Decisions that seem child-centred in the moment may have long-term implications for building positive family relationships and succeeding in school.

Factors to Consider in the Transition

Children benefit from spending time with their new family during the adopter's period of adoption leave. For all children, time exclusively with their new parent/s is vital for them to start making safe relationships. For young children, this is likely to be three to six months before they start nursery. For statutory school age children, this time period may be shorter but is likely to be several weeks and some research indicates this should be longer .

Educational decisions are highly personal. Each child and family is different, and timings about transition into education may vary, especially for older children where the child's views will be factored into the decision. If this extended period does not seem right, families, schools, and social workers should discuss the benefits and risks of such a decision. All decisions should consider the child's previous experiences and the impact of home and educational transitions. Regardless of the transition timeframe, adopters, social workers, and educators should work collaboratively using a team around the child approach to identify additional strategies and support.

A common concern is the fear of children missing out on educational opportunities and social time with friends, post-adoption. Parents may also need breaks and downtime, which is important. Alternative offers (e.g., local authority support such as play groups, Children's Centres) can help meet the child's social needs or provide parents with breaks, avoiding the need for immediate school/nursery enrolment. Families facing challenges at home may consider contacting adoption support services for family support or utilising their own support network. Relying on school to alleviate challenges could mask underlying issues that need addressing.



Understanding of Trauma

All adopted children are likely to have experienced trauma, even if limited to separation and loss. Experiences of neglect or abuse can impact early development, and children moving to an adoptive family have not recovered from early neglect and trauma, regardless of positive foster care experiences. Early trauma can lead to coping mechanisms that complicate relationships, emotions, and thinking. Children may be overly sensitive to others' moods and may mask their emotions, hiding sadness or anger. They may appear settled but harbour internal anxieties and uncertainties without genuine felt safety. Trauma and neglect can also disrupt sensory system development, causing hyper-vigilance and stressed, anxious responses to everyday situations. As children grow and encounter safe situations and relationships, these responses are likely to diminish.



These foundations with the primary carer(s) are vital for all future relationships and experiences, including school relationships and managing the stress of school. Parents need this time to equip the child with an understanding of not only relationships but of how life is learned and managed.

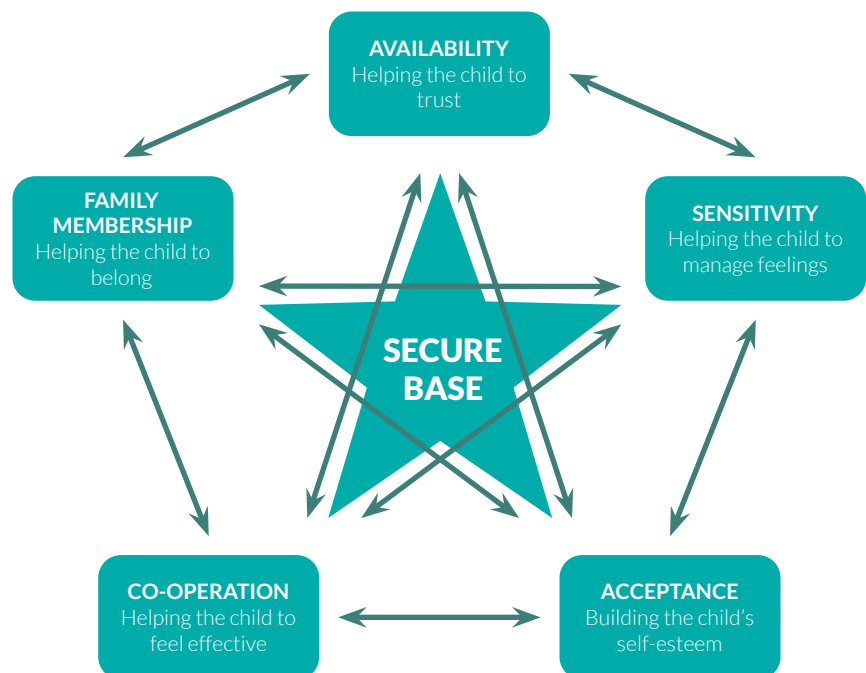
Family Futures, 2009

Attachment relationships are crucial for children to build a safe base from which to face the world, and these attachments are built over time through playful, attuned interactions. Family Futures Transitions Practice Paper (2009) states that time with primary carers allows “the psychological foundations to be laid and cemented.”

The Secure Base Model helps caregivers consider different approaches to move a child towards greater safety and security. Allowing time to build a secure base helps children feel part of their new family and form meaningful, attuned attachments to their adoptive parents through spending time together.

The Secure Base Model

Building a Secure Base and Attuned Relationships



The quality of our family relationships influences our ability to form healthy, supportive connections with friends and significant others. Adopted children may not have consistently experienced such family relationships, leading to difficulties in building relationships and managing emotions. Support models for children who have faced developmental trauma stress the importance of children feeling good about themselves and experiencing calm, regulated, and alert states. Adopters play a crucial role in helping children regulate their emotions, which is an essential step before they can develop other relationships. Establishing a reliable, safe, and secure bond with a child takes time, and spending full-time with the child during the initial months of adoption supports these attuned, connected relationships. This dedicated time with their new family creates a secure base, enabling children to thrive in relationships beyond their family.

Many adopted children may have poor self-esteem, even if they appear confident, chatty, and sociable. These behaviours can mask anxiety and unhelpful people-pleasing tendencies. All of this can impact a child's ability to engage in school, affecting their confidence to try new things, handling failure, feelings of rejection and shame, and mistrust of peers and staff, often leading to fight/flight/freeze (survival) responses. Building a secure base over time before starting nursery and school helps children develop trusting relationships and a sense of safety with adults. This foundation allows them to build other relationships and grow in their ability to reflect, learn, remember, articulate, and become self-assured, providing the platform to navigate the increased social, sensory and cognitive demands in an educational setting.

Legal Requirements to Attend School

At the time of adoptive placement, a child remains under the care of the local authority. The Children Act 1989 mandates that Local Authorities have a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of looked-after children, including their educational achievement. The child's social worker must ensure that efforts are made to minimise disruption to the child's education. Local Authorities are required to track educational progress through a Personal Education Plan (PEP) and to have a plan in place for access to education when a child is either in a setting or out of school. Until an Adoption Order is granted, the local authority retains parental responsibility, and decisions must be made in the child's best interests by those with this responsibility. The Local Authority's Virtual School have a key role in supporting care-experienced children with their education.

School Attendance Requirements

- Under 5s: School attendance is compulsory in the term following the child's 5th birthday. However, even for children under 5, there is an additional requirement to consider educational provision for children who are looked after at the point of adoptive placement and to minimise disruption to their education.
- Over 5s: It is the legal responsibility of every parent or carer to ensure their child receives an education, either by attending school or through alternative education methods. Adopters and parents have a legal duty to ensure their child attends school regularly. This means the child must attend every day, except in certain circumstances such as illness or having received permission for an absence in advance from the school.



**THE MORE HEALTHY
RELATIONSHIPS A
CHILD HAS, THE MORE
LIKELY HE WILL BE
TO RECOVER FROM
TRAUMA AND THRIVE.**

**RELATIONSHIPS
ARE THE AGENTS OF
CHANGE AND THE
MOST POWERFUL
THERAPY IS
HUMAN LOVE.**

**PEOPLE, NOT
PROGRAMMES,
CHANGE PEOPLE**

Dr Bruce Perry

“Working together to improve school attendance” (DfE 2024) states the limited circumstances in which a school can authorise an absence in advance, explaining that a school “can grant a leave of absence for other exceptional circumstances at their discretion”. The leave of absence is coded C in attendance records. This discretion could be used to allow an adoptive child time to settle into their new home.

Considering the state’s role in ensuring access to education and the educational progress of looked-after children, professionals are keen to minimise school absences. Therefore, it is essential for adopters to collaborate closely with the school and social workers to:

- Ensure all parties are aware of the importance of allowing the child time to settle into their new home.
- Agree on the initial duration of the child’s absence from school, ensuring the views of the child are considered within this decision.
- Determine any learning activities that can be completed at home during this time to prevent the child from falling behind. Play-based learning and projects that strengthen relationships at home are recommended.
- Discuss and plan the transition into school, including initial steps that can be taken during this period. (See Positive Planning for Transitions Guide, which provides a framework for meetings to discuss and plan transitions)
- Plan the arrangements for starting school. Some children may benefit from a gradual start, while others might do better starting full-time if they have had positive previous experiences.
- Consider the timing of starting school, ideally aligning it with the beginning of a school term or half-term.

Refer to the PAC UK leaflet for guidance on finding the right school.

Regular school attendance is important and significant absences can negatively impact attainment. However, disrupted attachments, neglect, and trauma also have substantial negative effects on the child’s development and long-term educational outcomes. It is crucial that decision-making prioritises the child’s attachment relationships and overall wellbeing, as these are key to their future success in education and life. A short delay in starting school or nursery can be beneficial in the long run, whereas rushing may leave important issues unaddressed, potentially impacting both educational attainment and family life.

This guidance is provided to support adopters and professionals to work together to make informed decisions, taking into account the child’s developmental history, experiences of developmental trauma and previous educational experiences to plan for transition into education with the child’s best interests at heart.

1 The Family Futures Transitions Practice Paper (2009) recommends that children stay home with their primary carer for 3-6 months following a placement transition. PAC-UK Adoption and Permanency Support recommends a minimum of “not less than six school weeks after the end of the introductions period,” with the option to extend as needed.

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