

Looked-after children, fostering and adoption

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This chapter explores:

- What is meant by the term 'looked after child' and reasons why children may be looked after;
- barriers to learning typically faced by looked after children and the importance of practitioner awareness of such barriers;
- the ways in which practitioners working with looked after children may reduce barriers to learning to further inclusion and improve educational outcomes;
- the importance of empathy, relationships and understanding to enable all children to thrive.

According to figures from HM Government (March, 2015), 69,540 children were looked after in the UK, a number which has increased year on year since 2011. In this chapter, we will discuss the incidence of looked after children and locate this in the context of education and inclusive practice. Education practitioners, scholars and policy makers are among those who are especially concerned with how the educational outcomes of these children may be improved particularly due to the fact that the attainment of looked after children is considerably behind that of those who are not looked after. Closing the gap between the attainment of looked after children and all young people remains a high priority of the Department for Education (HM Government, 2014). Children who are in care often experience significant barriers to learning. This chapter will seek to provide ways in which practitioners can reduce and remove some of these barriers and offer examples of inclusive practice which would benefit all children, including those who are looked after.

What is a looked after child (LAC)?

According to the Children Act 1989, if a child is deemed to be suffering or is at risk of significant harm in the United Kingdom, a local authority has the right to obtain a care order for them. If a court makes a care order in respect of a child to a local authority, the local authority assumes parental responsibility for that child. Thus, the child becomes looked after by the local authority. It is the responsibility of Social workers to find a place for the child to live which, in the majority of cases, is not their family home.

In 75% of cases (HM Government, 2015), the child is placed with carers who have been approved by the local authority and are referred to as foster carers. Children are placed in the foster carer's home and may live with other looked after children and/or the foster carers own family. Foster care placements are usually temporary, although some children remain with a foster family for many years. When a child is first taken in to care or looked after, their first foster placement may be a short one. This is so that social workers can spend time finding a suitable placement. Foster care placements should, where possible, be in the same area as where the child lived prior to entering care. Children living in foster care continue to attend the school or education setting they previously attended if this is feasible. If not, the local authority is in charge of finding a new education setting for the child to attend. Regulations made under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 state that looked after children are given the highest priority in admission arrangements for schools and education settings (Department for Education, 2014).

Some children may be placed in a residential care home if a suitable foster family placement cannot be found. Equally, a child may be placed in foster care but find it very difficult living with another family. The child may display challenging behaviour and a residential care placement sought. Care homes also provide more placements so it may be possible for siblings to be accommodated together if this is not possible in foster care. However, there are usually no more than 10 children in a residential care home (Who Cares Trust, 2016).

In a minority of cases, children who are subject to a care order will live with their birth families but the council will take parental responsibility for them and as such, has the right to make decisions regarding the child's education and welfare. Sometimes children are placed with another family member, such as a grandparent or adult sibling, whilst the local authority assesses the most suitable place for the child to live. This is known as kinship care. In the long term, it may be that the family members are approved as foster carers for the child but the local authority retain responsibility for their care. The Who Cares Trust (2016) estimate that there are as many as 2-300,000 children living in kinship care in the UK, however it is difficult to get accurate figure as many of these children are not subject to care orders. Parents or other family members may decide that kinship care is best for the child without the involvement of the courts or social workers. Therefore the child can be considered looked after but would not appear in official statistics and the local authority would not have parental responsibility for them.

If a child has committed a criminal offence or is judged to pose a significant risk to themselves or others they can be detained in a secure children's home. A secure care home restricts a young person's liberty and children placed here are considered to be looked after. On site education is provided and children typically attend 25-30 hours of school per week and make good progress in (Secure Children's Homes, 2016). However, in this chapter, we will primarily discuss looked after children who are in foster care or residential care homes due to the separate consideration which should be given to those in secure care homes.

A child will stop being looked after if they are adopted, returned home or they turn 18 (NSPCC, 2016). A local authority will make every effort to return a child to their birth family, however if their family is unable to provide adequate care, a child may be adopted. Many children wait a long time to find an adoptive family and older children often remain in permanent foster care if a suitable match cannot be found. When a looked after child turns 18 and leaves care, they will receive support from the local authority until they are 21. This support may include assistance with accommodation, finances and employment. It is important to note that children, who are adopted and therefore, no longer considered a LAC, will, in the vast majority of cases, have been looked after previously. Therefore, it is likely that adopted children will have probably suffered similar trauma to those who remain looked after and their needs must still be considered.

Why might a child be looked after?

There are a number of reasons why a child may become looked after. The vast majority of children who are looked after by the local authority have been removed from their families in order to keep them safe, as their families are unable to care for and protect them adequately. Children may be taken in to care because they have suffered emotional or physical abuse or neglect. Other incidences include children whose parents have died, are unable to care for them or are in another country. Some children may be 'accommodated' by the council at the parents request due to illness or emergencies which prevent or impair the parents' ability to adequately care for their child. This means that the child is looked after by carers other than their own family but their parents still retain responsibility for them and must be consulted regarding any decisions which involve the child. Some children may be looked after for a long period of time, whilst for others it is temporary. What is clear however, is that all children who are looked after will have experienced trauma and in many cases, frightening and emotional situations which means that they can display challenging behaviour and therefore, be challenging to work with. Schools and all those who work with such vulnerable children have a duty to understand, care for and support them in realising their potential.

Case Study

Millie is 6 years old; it is her first day at her new school. She had to leave the school she was happy and familiar with to come to this one. Although very anxious, Millie is somewhat comforted by the fact that Jackie, her foster carer is taking her to school and will at least be there to speak to her new teacher. As she approaches the school gates, she holds Jackie's hand very tightly and stares at the floor. If she is quiet, no one will want to speak to her and that's just fine. If no one speaks to her then no one will ask her why she is starting at a new school half way through the school year, no one will ask her why on some days, she is collected by social workers and most importantly no one will ask her why she is not allowed to live with her Mum and Dad anymore.

Millie and her younger sister, Jade, suffered sustained sexual and physical abuse at the hands of their father. Their mother, herself a victim of domestic violence and an alcoholic, knew about the abuse but was unable to keep the girls safe. Social services became involved when staff at Millie's previous school reported that her younger sister had displayed inappropriate sexualised behaviour towards her classmates. The girls were taken in to foster care and although placed with Jackie and her family in the same area, it was decided that they could no longer attend the same school because it would put them at risk of being approached by their parents.

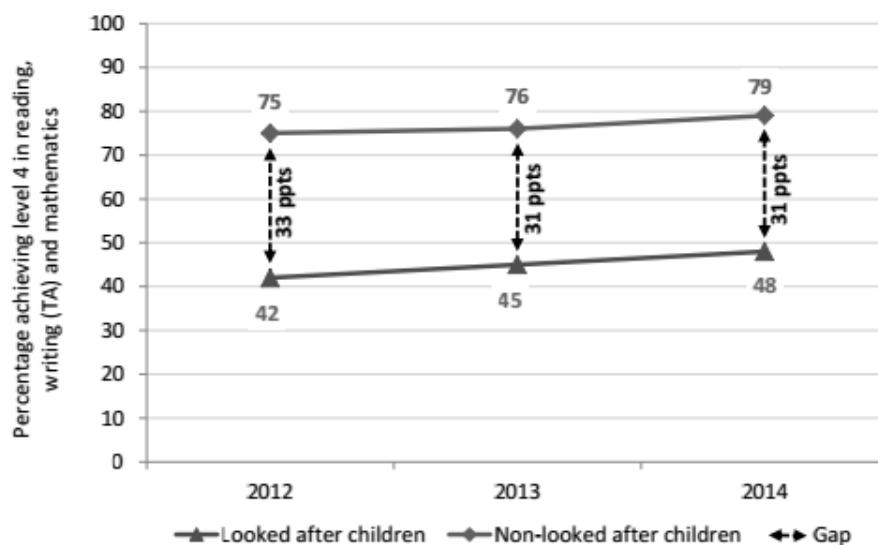
Millie is a bright girl, cooperative and quiet although she is very anxious. She has an extremely close relationship with her sister, however since they have been in foster care; they have had several ferocious arguments which result in violent physical fights. On some occasions recently, Millie has been defiant towards her fosters carers and this change in behaviour does seem to be linked to her situation and what she has been through.

How might being looked after act as a barrier to learning?

Despite educational attainment for looked after children in England improving over time, the attainment gap between those who are looked after and those who are not is significant. This pattern is also an international concern as “research demonstrates that low educational attainment of children in care is an issue in many countries” (Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead and Fernandes, 2012, cited in O’Higgins et al, 2015). At the end of Key Stage two in England, statutory assessment tests (SATs) are used as the measure for attainment. The government reports that ‘ 48 per cent of looked after children achieved the expected level in reading, writing (TA) and mathematics [SATs] combined in 2014 compared with 79 per cent of non-looked after children, an attainment gap of 31 percentage points.’

It is evident from data in chart 4 below that in Key Stage 2 SATs, looked after children are attaining far less well than those who are not looked after, however, there has been gradual improvement in progress over time. All children have made progress year on year, including looked after children.

Chart 4: Attainment for both sets of children has improved since 2012, and the gap has narrowed
Attainment and attainment gaps between the percentages of looked after and non-looked after children achieving the expected level in reading, writing (TA) and mathematics, 2012-2014



HM Government, 2014

There has long been a recognised link between attainment in Key Stage 2 SATs and Key Stage 4, when GCSE’s are used as the attainment measure. If a child attains below the expected level in Mathematics at Key Stage 2 for example, it is highly likely that they will achieve below a grade C in their Maths GCSE. Statistics released by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2014 continue to indicate that the vast majority of children who do not meet expected outcomes in Key Stage 2 will not meet the expected outcomes of five GCSE grades at A-C. Since less than half of looked after

children achieve expected outcomes at Key Stage 2, it is unsurprising that only 12% of looked after children achieved 5 A-C grades in 2013/14 compared to 52% of non-looked after children (HM government, 2014).

Inclusive practice takes in to account the unique needs of the individual child. A looked after child will not necessarily have similar needs or experience the same difficulties compared to their peers because *all* children, and indeed all people, are different. When working with any child, practitioners should seek to understand the needs of the individual and adjust teaching and learning accordingly through effective differentiation. However, research and statistical data identifies some common factors which act as a barrier to learning for looked after children as a group and these will be discussed subsequently.

Due to the fact that looked after children will have experienced trauma and loss, it is perhaps not unsurprising that many experience poor mental health. In 2014, just half of the population of looked after children were considered to have 'normal' emotional and behavioural health (HM Government). There is an established link between mental health and attainment. Vulnerable children such as these, who have at times not had their basic physiological, safety and relationship needs met, often have very low self-esteem. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) it will be more difficult for children who have suffered unmet needs at a basic level (food, security and love for example) to progress and reach their cognitive and personal potential and achieve 'self-actualisation'.

According to data collated by HM Government, in 2014 17.9 per cent of the *total* population of children had a Special Educational Need (SEN). However 66.6% (or two thirds) of looked after children had an SEN which is evidently much higher than the population as a whole. The most common type of SEN for looked after children are 'behavioural, emotional and social difficulties' (HM government, 2014). John Bowlby's (1953) work on attachment is very useful in furthering our understanding of the emotional difficulties a looked after child may face. "Attachment' is a term which refers to the state and quality of an individual's attachments. These can be divided in to secure and insecure attachment' (Holmes, 2014:67). Looked after children will have experienced trauma and separation from their primary caregivers at some point regardless of whether they are then returned to their family or adopted by a new family. Bowlby identified that if bonds with primary carers are broken, immediate distress and long term psychological damage will occur. Bomber and Hughes (2013) highlight the fact that there is a direct correlation between emotional growth and learning. They state that the development of meaningful relationships with key adults is essential to emotional growth, with the same being true for learning. Consequently, looked after children who do not have secure and meaningful attachments with key adults will find it very difficult to learn.

An additional consequence of insecure attachment, poor mental health and low self-esteem can mean that looked after children display challenging behaviour which can be defiant and violent in nature. As a result, the number of looked after children who are permanently excluded from school is twice as high as non-looked after children, although it is falling at a faster rate (HM Government, 2014). If children are not able to access learning due to their emotional state or because of literal exclusion from it, it is inevitable that their educational outcomes will be very poor.

'Frequent movement within the care system is another of the factors which has been linked to educational underachievement. Changes of placement frequently mean changes of school and these changes often occur at inappropriate times' (Jackson, 1989 cited in Goddard, 2000). Local authorities have a duty to ensure that children subject to care orders are placed near to their home, do not experience disruption to their education and are placed with or near any siblings they have. However, this may not always be possible for reasons such as availability of suitable foster care placements, requirement to move a child away for protection or the breakdown of a foster placement. Looked after children may have periods of non-attendance during transitions between placements. This may also occur *during* a placement if the relationship between the foster carer and child is a challenging one. Absences from school over time are likely to result in gaps in a child's learning which makes it difficult for them to do well. For all children, starting at a new school and in a new class each year can be an anxious time. All children want to feel secure and familiar in the school and with their peers and adults. For looked after children, who have already experienced loss and separation, moving to a new school can be particularly distressing and is highly likely to have an impact on mental health and therefore, educational outcomes.

It is necessary to emphasise that in their international systematic review of research, O'Higgins, Sebba and Luke (2015) concluded that being in care is not *in itself* a factor for poor educational outcomes for looked after children. Their review found that 'there is a correlation between being in care and educational outcomes but that this relationship is mediated by a number of individual, family, environmental and risk factors...there is little support for the claim that being in foster or kinship care per se is detrimental to the educational outcomes of children in care' (O'Higgins et al, 2015:5). As we have already mentioned, looked after children will have and continue to experience trauma and it is these pre care experiences that are a key factor in affecting educational outcomes. Simply being in care does not mean that a child will have lower educational outcomes than those who are not. It is, however, clear that looked after children face a number of barriers to learning which will require the understanding of practitioners to ensure they are included.

Case study

Millie, now 7, has settled in well to her Year 3 class, she has small group of close friends and is doing well academically. Millie becomes very frustrated when her work, particularly writing, does not turn out exactly the way she had planned it. This means that sometimes her work is incomplete as she 'gives up' on getting it 'right'.

She has formed a good relationship with her class teacher and can be relied upon to be a good role model, she continues to be cared for by a foster family and has occasional 'contact' meetings with her Mum supervised by social services. Some mornings Millie arrives at school teary and visibly morose, she joins her peers at her table but puts her head in her hands and withdraws. Her class teacher has seen her like this before and quietly calls her for a chat while the teaching assistant continues taking the register with the rest of the class. Millie explains to her class teacher that she is upset due to a fight she had with her sister Jade that morning during which Jade has told Millie that she hates her. The teacher reassures Millie and organises some time for her and her sister to speak to the learning mentor about the argument later that morning. Millie is able to join the class and participates fully in the lesson. After lunch, Millie returns to the classroom upset after a quarrel with a friend, there is another adult covering the class as the class teacher has non-contact time. Although the cover teacher is known to the class, they tend to misbehave when she is in charge. That afternoon the children were taking part in a practical group activity, the cover teacher found it difficult to manage the behaviour of some of the pupils resulting in arguments within the groups, shouting and an unacceptable level of noise. Feeling unable to inform the teacher of her distress due to the continual noise, without asking permission Millie left the classroom and sets off towards the school gates in order to leave.

How might practitioners improve educational outcomes for looked after children?

Under section 22 of the Children's Act (1989) it states that 'The duty of a local authority under subsection (3)(a) to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child looked after by them includes in particular a duty to promote the child's educational achievement.' In England, every local authority must appoint someone to promote the educational achievement of all the children looked after by that council. This person is known as a virtual school head teacher (VSH). The VSH is responsible for all looked after children in the borough and even though the children are physically attending different schools, they are on one 'virtual' school roll. Since 2009 it has been statutory for schools to have a designated teacher who is responsible for the educational achievement of any children in care in their school. The designated teacher is often the head teacher or other member of the senior leadership team, the inclusion manager or special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), for example. It is the duty of the VSH and designated teacher to ensure that other practitioners in an education setting understand the issues which affect looked after children. They should also promote a culture of inclusion and high expectations for the outcomes of children in care. However,

to return to the principles of inclusion, it is the responsibility of *all* practitioners to ensure the best outcomes for *all* children.

Figure 1 shows the key recommendations in the DfE guidance (2009) in improving the attainment of looked after children. The guidance was produced based on the good practice observed in a sample of 14 Primary schools. A fundamental message from this report and from what is known about good inclusive practice is that practitioners should ‘do what they do for all children but more so’ to raise the attainment of looked after children.

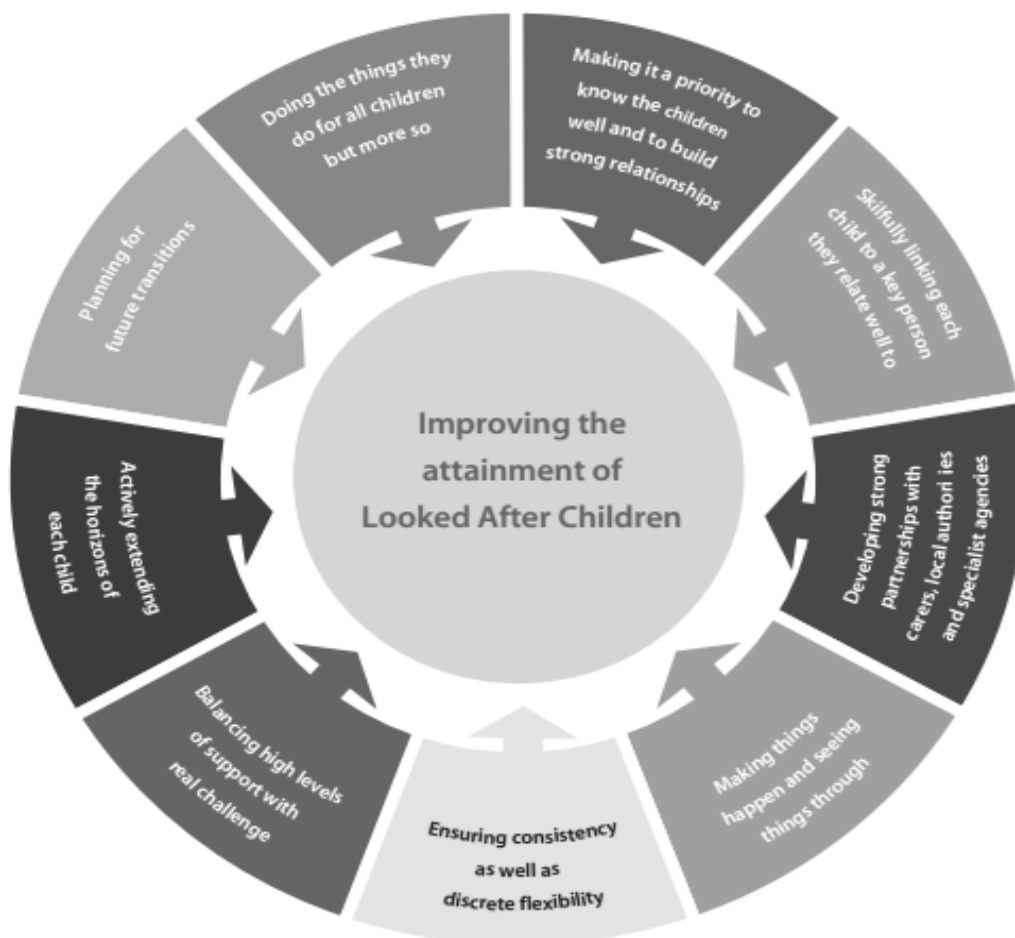


Figure 1

HM Government, 2009

All looked after children must have a care plan and an integral part of this is a Personal Education Plan (PEP). The PEP is an evolving document detailing intended outcomes and objectives for the child and the steps that will be required to meet the child's needs. The PEP is essentially, the document which sets out an individual plan to support the child in achieving their potential. It is crucial that practitioners have high expectations of what a looked after child can achieve, just as they should with all children, but that they are realistic about the support a LAC may require to get there. LAC are one of the groups of children who attract pupil premium funding, that is local authorities will receive a pupil premium grant based on the number of children who have been looked after for at least one day. The additional funding is provided to help close the attainment gap between LAC and their peers. It is likely that the PEP will identify specific interventions for those children falling behind or indeed to challenge those who are performing well and pupil premium funding can enable these interventions to take place. The designated teacher will take the lead on the development and implementation of the PEP and 'should use it to support the personalised learning of the child' (DfE 2014:14), but all relevant professionals such as social workers should have input. Most importantly, the child should be involved in the creation of the PEP. The child's voice should be taken account of when understanding and identifying the child's needs. Of course, an inclusive practitioner should take account of any child's views and ideas in relation to their learning and provision but for looked after children this is especially important to ensure they feel empowered.

As there are many professionals across different agencies involved in the care of a looked after child, it is of utmost importance that good communication is established between them. The PEP contributes to this because 'when they are used effectively, PEPs improve the educational experience of the child by helping everyone gain a clear and shared understanding about the teaching and learning provision necessary to meet the child's education needs and how that will be provided' (DfE, 2009:13).

Activity

It is good practice for schools to hold regular meetings for staff. Whilst information concerning LAC must be treated as confidential and shared on a need to know basis only, if appropriate ask a school SENCO/inclusion manager to organise visit from an educational psychologist or social worker who can give an overview of what it means to be a LAC, and the impact this can have on a child's educational experience and progress.

Seek permission to create a staff reference booklet that is kept in a secure area which identifies LAC and gives helpful information about possible triggers or difficulties they may face within the educational setting. Information you could include is who the designated teacher is, which key adults the child has good relationships with and strategies to use in those peoples absence. It is not necessary for everyone to know the details of the child's situation but it is helpful to know if more care and sensitive understanding is needed.

(Knowles, 2010)

Central to supporting looked after children, whose mental health is often particularly fragile, is supporting them to develop positive relationships with adults and their peers. As discussed, many vulnerable children have been let down by the very adults they have relied upon and as such, LAC often find it difficult to trust others. As Golding and Hughes (2012, cited in Bomber and Hughes, 2013:3) state 'all children need relationships to thrive; traumatised children need relationships to heal'. Bomber and Hughes (2013) go on to say that the provision of an attachment figure such as a key adult in an education setting *in addition* to an attachment figure at home can make a real difference to a child in terms of their emotional health. It is hoped that a looked after child will have formed an attachment to their primary carer, whether this be a foster or kinship carer or key worker in residential care, who will provide consistency, reliability and adequate care. It is important then, that education settings are able to provide at least one key adult with whom the child can form an attachment in order that child experiences feelings of safety and security. Geddes (2006:141) cited in Bomber and Hughes (2013:25) describes these adults as a 'surrogate secure base' for the child. A child who feels safe and cared for in an educational setting will be much more likely to be able to settle to learn. Showing empathy towards children can also have a positive effect on emotional state and therefore ability to learn. Empathy involves having awareness and showing an understanding of how another person may be feeling or thinking. "Our pupils need to experience our empathy if they are to experience value, understanding, safety and the desire to learn when they are with us" (Bomber and Hughes, 2013:142). If practitioners are able to approach interactions with vulnerable pupils such as those who are looked after with empathic understanding they will be optimising the conditions to enable learning to take place. Being empathic does not mean excusing challenging behaviour however, it is necessary for children to understand the behaviour that is acceptable and what is not. Nevertheless, if we are able to relate to children with empathy we can provide emotional and mental safety for them leading to greater inclusion for all.

Activity

During their pre care experiences, looked after children are likely to have experienced adults who are:

- Unavailable
- Stern
- Distant
- Insensitive
- Cold
- Shut down
- Cut off from feeling
- Frightening

Practitioners in education settings have the opportunity to be:

- Available
- Warm
- Present
- Sensitive
- Reassuring
- Opened up
- Connected to feeling
- Kind

In education settings where there are usually many children, practitioners are responsible for ensuring behaviour is managed effectively to create a safe, calm and purposeful learning environment. This is indeed necessary, however, quite often we relate to children in some of the negative ways listed above in order to maintain 'discipline' and order or because we fear that if we are 'too soft' challenging behaviour will be unmanageable. If we consider the benefits of showing empathy and providing additional attachment figures, relating to children positively seems more beneficial.

Try relating to children in the positive ways listed above.

What difference does this make to behaviour in your setting?

Note down differences in children's responses when you approach a situation in this way.

Adapted from Bomber and Hughes (2013).

Supporting transition – what happens when a child leaves care?

As discussed earlier, a child stops being looked after for three reasons: adoption, turning 18 years old or being returned to the family. In most cases a child leaves care because they are adopted or because they reach adulthood, a smaller number of children return home. In an education setting, the most likely end of care scenario practitioners will experience is that of adoption. If an adoptive family has been found for the child, social services have a responsibility to support both the child and the new family with the transition but it is equally important for the education setting to support the child. If the child's adoptive family is in a different area, not only will the child be moving to a new home, they will move to a new school also.

Case Study

Now in the final few weeks of year 3 and aged 8, Millie feels settled and content in her school and she is finding arguments with her sister easier to deal with. She now has very limited contact sessions with her Mum and although regularly expressing that she wishes to live back at home with her family, she is for the most part, happy with her foster family. Millie is aware that the courts will soon meet to decide whether she may return, along with her sister, into the care of her parents. Millie's behaviour at school begins to deteriorate and her foster family notice that her bed wetting is becoming more frequent. The school increases the frequency of the time that Millie spends with the learning mentor, both in class and as a therapeutic intervention out of lessons. The learning mentor works with Millie on an art project which documents Millie's life through photographs and drawing. A few weeks before the summer holidays, the court rules that Millie and her sister will not return to their family and that a permanent adoptive placement will be sought. Millie withdraws and refuses to discuss the subject. It is eventually the learning mentor who she chooses to talk to, expressing anger, fear and resistance initially.

As highlighted in the case study above, the permanence of the decision that a looked after child will not return to their family is a difficult experience. Even if a child is fully aware and accepting of the reasons they are not able to return home, fundamentally children love their families and do not want to be separated from them. It is very likely that a looked after child's behaviour will change leading up to or following a court hearing making empathic understanding from practitioners of upmost importance. If a child is found an adoptive family in or outside their local area, some of the activities detailed below may be used to enable a transition which allows the child to continue to learn.

Activity

To support looked after children during transition you could work with them to make two identical memory books of their time at the education setting for each of you. This shows that you will remember them and provides a way for them to remember you too. You could leave some pages blank to encourage them to continue with adding in details of their new beginning. It can help to maintain links via cards or letters and the child's peers can share in this with the support of the practitioner. The child should also be given opportunities to develop relationships in the new setting so contact would be reduced over time.

(Knowles, 2010)

It can also be helpful for all children (both the looked after child and their peers) to experience children's literature on the theme in order to make sense of what is happening. The following texts offer stories on the theme of different families, fostering and adoption and may be used in a whole class context or with individual children as a starting point for discussion.

- THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF FAMILIES Mary Hoffman, illustrated by Ros Asquith.
- SNOWFLAKES Cerrie Burnel, illustrated by Laura Ellen Anderson.
- SCARLET IBIS Gill Lewis.
- THE RED THREAD: AN ADOPTION FAIRY TALE Grace Lin.
- MOTHERBRIDGE OF LOVE Anonymous, illustrated by Josée Masse.

Suggestions from Letterbox Library (2016)

In this chapter we have discussed who a looked after child is and reasons why they may be looked after. We have provided an overview of the many possible barriers to learning that looked after children may face. In suggesting ways practitioners may help to reduce such barriers, ways of working which can benefit *all* children and support them in improving education outcomes have been highlighted. Finally consideration has been given to periods of transition and adoption. It is

necessary to remember though, that children who have been looked after at any point in their lives will benefit from our time, understanding and empathy in working to ensure that they are included in our education system.

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