

HELPING ADOPTED AND FOSTERED CHILDREN LEARN

Western Australia

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS



It is common for children who have joined a family through adoption, permanent care, or long-term foster care, to need some extra support at school.

Attachment difficulties (even in children adopted at infancy) are to be expected, and many children will have endured neglect and traumatic experiences.

The impact of childhood trauma and attachment difficulties are still not well understood in the wider community. As a parent you are your child's most powerful advocate. In order to support your child both at school and at home, it is valuable to be well equipped with information.

This resource contains the following information:

- What do we mean by trauma and attachment difficulties?
- Enrolling your child in school
- Resources for teachers and parents.

What do we mean by 'trauma and attachment difficulties'?

Trauma

The term trauma commonly refers to a single traumatic event. Children who have experienced ongoing and sustained abuse or neglect, or abandonment of a caregiver are said to have experienced complex trauma. Every facet of a child's development can be impacted by complex trauma, and sometimes long after any immediate danger or threat to a child has gone.

Complex trauma has a persistent impact on a child's ability to focus and engage academically and socially at school. Some children who have experienced trauma behave in ways that are disruptive, while others are withdrawn. Some can contain their stress and behaviour while at school but then let it all out when they are at home. Usually children who have experienced trauma will have a younger emotional age than their peers and may struggle to make and/or keep friends.

What is disrupted attachment?

A healthy attachment between a child and at least one primary carer is a fundamental building block for their emotional development.

A strong attachment bond functions to keep children close to those who will feed, protect and nurture them as they grow. Healthy attachment also provides a safe base for children from which they can explore the world and provides them with a model for how to form relationships.

Attachment can be disrupted by abuse or neglect of a child, but also by circumstances such as a mother experiencing post-natal depression, or medical problems and hospitalization of either child or mother. Separation from the biological parents that occurs when a child is adopted, even in infancy, or when they are removed from their birth families for their own safety, will result in some level of attachment disruption.

Children with disrupted attachments will come to believe or expect that adults can bring pain or harm, or overwhelming emotions, or that adults can leave you feeling distressed and alone.

Some common issues that arise for children who have experienced trauma and/or attachment difficulties are:

- Difficulty making transitions from home to school, and between activities, spaces and teachers at school
- Difficulty regulating their emotions
- Feeling unsafe and worrying about real and imagined risks
- Trouble focussing in class
- Memory problems.

Enrolling your child in school

When enrolling your child at school, inform the principal of your child's background and needs so that the appropriate supports can be put in place.

Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan is written specifically for a particular child and describes strategies to support them that all staff working with that child at school can access and use.

All children in foster and permanent care in Western Australia are required to have an education plan. Adopted children who have special educational needs are also eligible, and should have a plan developed for them.

The Western Australian Department of Education advises parents to:

- Consult with a professional such as a child psychologist, or pediatrician
- Speak with your child's teacher, and the school principal
- Arrange an assessment for your child if necessary.

If your child is found to have special educational needs or a learning disability, a support team will be established. The support team includes parents, and may include teachers, the principal, school psychologist, case managers (for children in foster care), medical practitioners and other specialist service providers.

For more information see the Western Australian Department of Education website: <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/web/at-school/supporting-childrens-learning/children-with-special-learning-needs>

Resources for Teachers and Parents

The following publications explain in more detail how trauma and attachment issues impact on a child, and offer some strategies to help children feel safe enough to engage and learn.

Safe Spaces, Safe Faces, Safe Places

An Adopt Change booklet introducing the concept of trauma and outlining the key areas of trauma-informed teaching practice, available on our website www.adopchange.org.au

What is it to be 'trauma-aware': An introductory resource for educators in their work with children and young people

An Adopt Change information paper introducing the concept of complex trauma; the reasons why children who have spent time in out of home care and/or have been legally adopted, may be at particular risk of experiencing longer term trauma; and practitioner reflections on the implementation of trauma-aware practices when working with children and young people.

Making SPACE for Learning: A resource guide to assist schools to unlock the potential of traumatised children and young people to grow and develop at school.

A resource guide, to assist teachers, principals and other education professionals to better understand why traumatised children and young people act and react in the ways they do.

<http://det.wa.edu.au/detcms/inclusiveeducation/child-protection/public/files/making-space-for-learning---trauma-informed-practice-in-schools.en?title=Making+Space+for+Learning+--+Trauma+Informed+Practice+in+Schools>

Calmer Classrooms:

A guide to working with traumatised children

The role of teachers in the lives of traumatised children cannot be underestimated. This booklet encourages teachers and other school personnel to forge those attachments through two key mechanisms: understanding traumatised children and developing relationship-based skills to help them. Teachers who understand the effects of trauma on children's education, who are able to develop teaching practices to help them, and who are able to participate actively and collaboratively in the systems designed to support traumatised children will not only improve their educational outcomes but will assist in their healing and recovery.

<http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/pdfs/calmer-classrooms-guide.pdf>

What About Me? : Inclusive Strategies to Support Pupils with Attachment Difficulties Make it Through the School Day by Louise M. Bomber

What would a genuinely supportive school day look like in real practice, for children who have experienced attachment difficulties and developmental vulnerability? What are the core features of an attachment-friendly school? How can we promote inclusion and positively affect learning outcomes amongst pupils in need, at risk, in care and adopted? The book is full of practical ideas that can easily be integrated into the busyness of everyday school life.

<https://www.bookdepository.com/What-About-Me-Louise-Michelle-Bomber/9781903269183?ref=grid-view&qid=1517977657500&sr=1-2>

Optimum Learning Environments for Traumatized Children: How Abused Children Learn Best in School

A paper by Dr Dave Zeigler that provides a conceptual framework leading to practical implementation in learning environments.

http://www.jaspermountain.org/optimum_learning_environment.pdf