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## **Supporting care experienced children, young people and their families during Covid-19.**

Within your school you are likely to have on roll, children who have been in care and now adopted or placed under a Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements order. All these children will have been affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences. Therefore, there is a strong possibility that they have also been affected more by the impact of the situation caused by the current Covid pandemic. As a result, schools need to be aware of this and be proactive in carefully planning ongoing support for this cohort of children.

### **Kent County Council supporting children under Special Guardianship Orders.**

Kent County Council has accessed the Covid Adoption and Special Guardian Support Fund (ASF) to purchase Annual Subscriptions and Memberships to three organisations who offer a range of services and support to families.

There are two leaflets attached with this newsletter – one explaining the [subscriptions and memberships that are open to families with children who have previously be in the care of a local authority](#) and the second leaflet explaining the [services available through Kent County Council for any family with a child who has a Special Guardianship Order](#) (i.e. they do not necessarily have to have been in care prior to the order being granted).

**Please can we ask that you pass these leaflets to all your relevant families within your school and encourage them to take up the memberships or subscriptions as soon as possible, or by the end of December 2020 at the latest.**



## Virtual School Kent Previously Looked After Children Team.

As a Virtual School with a responsibility for providing support for children in care and for providing information and guidance for Previously Looked After Children, we felt it important and useful to summarise and signpost schools through the vast array of advice and information being targeted at schools.

Although this information is given to support those children who have been in care, it will also be applicable for those children and young people who are experiencing a difficult journey through childhood or who are currently in care.

### Why are these children any different from others?

Children who have been subject to Adverse Childhood Experiences may well still be suffering from the impact of this trauma. They will have conscious and subconscious memories of unpleasant and dramatic past transitions. Many will suffer from separation anxiety and have difficulties with self-regulation and executive functioning skills.

From the 'smallest' transitions e.g. moving from the playground to the classroom, to transitioning back into school after a summer holiday break can be difficult for these children. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to acknowledge that the transition back to school after the Covid lockdown is probably going to be just as tricky. The initial transition may start out well, but this is a transition to school like no other and it may be several weeks or months before you can confidently say that 'everything is OK'.

The start of the lockdown happened with very little warning and no time to properly prepare children or their parents, guardians and carers. As a result, there was a heightened personal, family and national sense of anxiety and fear with dramatic changes to routines at home. Suddenly many children were being educated at home in isolation from their school friends and teachers. Parents, guardians and carers had to take on responsibility for home education. Other children had to attend school but would have found themselves in a different world from the one they were familiar with, complete with restrictions and expectations of new behaviour. This tension would have been transmitted to all children, who then had to deal with this sudden and complete change of routine, not seeing their friends or their network of familiar adults e.g. grandparents and teachers. The extended period of uncertainty, with no fixed end date for a return to normal has only fuelled this sense of being out of control and not feeling safe and we talk of there being a new normal which further adds to the worry.



In April 2020, Adoption UK carried out a nationwide survey of parents, guardians and carers of care-experienced children who would normally be in school. There were 674 responses. Here are some of the findings:

- 50% of parents/ guardians / carers say their child is experiencing emotional distress and anxiety
- 31% of families are experiencing an increase in violent and aggressive behaviour from their children
- 63% of parents/guardians / carers think their child will need extra support during the transition back to school
- More than half of all secondary aged pupils seem calmer without the need to attend school.

If you are interested in reading the whole report, you can access it [here](#).

Adoption UK have also produced a range of webinars for parents and schools regarding transitions for care-experienced children. This [Webinar](#) is particularly useful for teachers and schools.

The British Psychology Society have also put together a fantastic report, entitled **“Supporting care-experienced children and young people during the Covid-19 crisis and its aftermath”** which explains the implications of this crisis and how schools and families can support children to overcome this experience. The report has many very useful links to other websites and short videos. The report can be found [here](#)

The Scottish division of the Psychology Society have recently published a document for schools entitled **Compassionate transitions: Reconnecting school communities post-Covid-19 Closures** which can be found [here](#). Although this refers to Scottish Education, it is recommended reading as it looks at the need and priorities of establishing a trauma informed resilient school community.



## Top 10 Tips for supporting children:

We have had a lot of positive feedback since schools have started back – this is encouraging and thanks to your dedication and support given, it is hoped that this will continue in the weeks and months to come.

Here are some tips for you as schools to think about and work with your parents /guardians / carers to ensure there is a continued plan for the support of these children:

### 1. Think Trauma Aware:

This pandemic and subsequent lockdown has been traumatic for all of us, but for children who have already experienced trauma in their lives, this is an additional traumatic time for them. They may be less resilient and may well need extra support to overcome this period in their lives. Only by understanding the impact that trauma has on people, can we start to really understand the implications to children's wellbeing and ultimately their learning.

There are a vast array of resources, webinars and online information for schools available on trauma for care-experienced children, for example, [Beacon House](#) , [Trauma Informed Schools](#) and [Touchbase](#) . Other Websites with useful resources specifically for Previously Looked After Children include:-

- Adoption UK [website](#)
- Braveheart Education [website](#)
- Coram Life Education [website](#)
- The Adoptables School Toolkit [website](#)
- First 4 Adoption [website](#)
- PAC-UK [website](#)

### 2. Think Community Resilience:

If you want your school to be a resilient community recovering from this period of uncertainty, you need to plan as a community. Staff wellbeing is crucial, they too have been through differing experiences of Lockdown and will have anxiety around the coming months.

Being a school team and looking at the areas of trauma together and individually will enable you to plan the emotional wellbeing of your staff and pupils much more effectively. Just as children need to feel safe before they can learn, teachers need to feel safe physically and mentally before they can teach. Children need to feel that the adults around them feel safe.



For more information on how to build a resilient community, please refer to the Trauma Aware resources above.

### 3. Think Child Centred Approach:

Children's wellbeing needs to come first. Learning will follow. Children need to know that:

- They are being listened to.
- They feel safe within the environment, with staff and with peers. They need to know that teachers are thinking of them and that they can think about others.
- They need to have a sense of belonging and that they are very much part of the class and school communities.
- They need to experience success.
- They need to be involved in any planning and ideas for the future. This will not only help them to feel connected and part of the class and future, but also encourage them to 'buy in' to their learning.
- With parents / carer and child, put together a Mental Health Wellbeing Plan. Learn 4 Mental Health has a good plan to [use](#).

### 4. Think Sensory:

Care Experienced Children often have sensory difficulties associated with historical trauma effecting the brain or neurodevelopmental difficulties leading to poor sensory processing. Children with these difficulties often find it hard to regulate themselves through the day (in some cases children appear to be coping well during the school day and will have outbursts of behaviour and regulating difficulties when they return home to their safe environment and adults). They may fidget, show lack of concentration and focus, or exhibit inappropriate behaviours and over/under react to situations.

Remember, if they found formal learning hard prior to lock down, they are very likely to find it harder moving back into formal learning, particularly as the term progresses. Ensure you have incorporated sensory regulating activities throughout the day, for example:

- Think about your body language – Some children can perceive threat even when there is none. Over emphasise smiles, use your 'story telling voice' – talk though your body language and thoughts so that children can process your intentions correctly, for example "I'm smiling because I am so pleased to see you".
- Find out what helps the individual child to find their 'just right' levels of arousal and attention. Parents/guardians will know of things that they have noticed about their children that helps them to calm down or increase their attention. Incorporate as many



movement opportunities into the school day as possible, for example, reaching up to write on the board, pushing against a wall, stretching, standing, hanging from a climbing frame etc. Encourage parents/guardians to put chewy and/or crunchy food items in packed lunches as these help to regulate.

- Ask children to carry rucksacks (with their books to add weight) to and from school.
- Incorporate an activity between break times and lesson times to support the gradual regulation of senses.
- Allow access to Sensory/Calm Boxes, a Safe Space (with limited sensory input) and allow them to use strategies that they use at home (fiddling with blue tack, doodling on a notepad whilst they listen etc).
- Incorporate as many movement breaks and sensory activities within the routine of the day between more formal learning time. Try to reduce the length of time children are static at their desks. Help them to learn the new routine gradually, bearing in mind some children will have had limited opportunities for structured exercise and routines and will seek the comfort of activities they have become used to, for example screen time.
- This [Resource Pack](#) from Leicestershire and Rutland County Councils and the NHS Leicestershire Partnership is full of information and strategies for supporting children from Key Stage 1 through to Key Stage 4 with Sensory Processing Differences in School Settings.
- Speak to your local STLS teams who will be able to advise you on recommended Sensory Diet assessments to use.

**N.B. Please note that all of the above ideas should be discussed with parents/guardians first to ensure that the strategies will have positive effect.**

## 5. Think Healthy Mind:

Incorporating other strategies and interventions into the daily routine will encourage healthy minds ready for learning.

- Find out what activities these children enjoyed at home and embed these into the daily routine at school.
- Use Mindfulness resources/activities throughout the day, for example, including thinking, breathing, yoga, group exercises.
- Signpost families to the Local Authority and NHS resources on Mental Health.
- Mentally Healthy Schools have developed a toolkit to help with transitioning children back into schools which is full of useful resources for individuals and whole class activities. Information can be found [here](#)
- The department of Education ran a 90 minute [webinar](#) on Supporting Pupil and Student Mental Wellbeing which is definitely worth watching for a detailed understanding on how to respond and



support pupils back into school.

## 6. Think Bubbles. Think Nurture:

We have heard from many parents and guardians that the new bubble systems are working well for some of their children. This, often smaller, positive environment is making them feel safe and therefore a nurturing environment to help them to learn. Think about:

- Where does the child sit in the classroom – would they feel safer if they are at the back of the classroom by the wall, so that they can see everything that is going on in front of them.
- Ensure a calming environment with calming colours, music, limiting unnecessary visual/auditory input.
- Help to establish routines - Visual Timetables are a perfect way to help children understand the day ahead and help them to become familiar with the new routines of the day.
- Carry out a Boxall Profile, to help to identify key areas of support over the forthcoming months. VSK can support with this.
- Show the children your loss – your sadness for what has happened and let them understand that it is OK to feel sad and different. Show them that you are together and that you will develop your resilience together for the future.

## 7. Think Relationships

The relationships between pupil and teacher, teacher and teaching staff, teacher and home, parents and child. All these relationships are key to the understanding and supporting the child's worries and needs. When you welcome children into your community, you are also welcoming their family and this should develop a strong relationship with the child's wider support network as much as with the individual child. This will all help to make the child feel more secure. They will understand that the network of people around them are working together to make them feel safe. Using the same language, messages and consistent approach will reassure them of boundaries and expectations and that the adults around them are in control in a safe, secure and nurturing way.

- Talk to parents and carers about what works for their children at home. Use similar strategies and language to keep that consistent approach for the child.
- Keep communication open from home to school and school to home. Ensure parents and carers are aware of the positives and keep negative news to a minimum. Allow the





children to trust that if issues are sorted out during the day, then they are over. Each day is a new day.

- Some parents or carers may appear to be overanxious. They are advocates for their children and although the children may appear to be fine at school, listen to those parents and carers who say their children are dysregulated when they return home. It may be that the child needs more regulation activities throughout the day to be in the right state to learn. (Imagine trying to concentrate at work when others around you are speaking a foreign language or are distracting you all day). Children may give the impression they are coping and learning, but they will not be able to sustain this day in day out, without causing stress to themselves and others around them.
- Give the children time and reason to develop relationships with key members of the school community. Listen and watch out for who they respond to more than others. Never underestimate the power and connection children may have with office staff, dinner ladies or the caretaker. They are all vitally important people within the school community and if a child feels secure with that person, allow them time to bond with them and feel safe with them.
- As Rebecca Brooks talks about in her book, *“The Trauma and Attachment-Aware Classroom”*, building positive and nurturing relationships within school actually encourages academic achievement. Wellbeing and self-esteem are a result of positive relationships and the higher level of emotional and social wellbeing we have, the better we will achieve academically.
- Spend time, out of the curriculum, to build peer and staff/ teacher-pupil relationships. This investment will pay dividends in the future and help you all to recover from this period in our lives and will lead to you becoming more resilient as individuals and as a whole school community.

## 8. Think New:

Returning to school is hard, even if children do not always express this. They are trying to manage the transition back to school, leaving parents/ guardians / carers, seeing their friends, and developing their social skills, adjusting to the new boundaries and expectations of the new school rules.

Think about:

- Allowing them time to get to know and trust staff members again. They are going to have to experience and manage being in an environment with more than just their family or





family unit and they are going to have experience an environment that is much larger and different than their safe environment of home.

- If you have not already done so, **please** reconnect with these children and families. Encourage Teaching Assistants, Teachers and key staff members to regularly show the children that they are thinking of them – even if they are not in their new bubble. Reassure them that school is a safe place to be.
- Each child in each class, needs to learn to be part of a school team again. Continue to encourage team building activities, including reflecting as well as planning together for the future. This will help with children’s sense of belonging and support their wellbeing.
- Think about encouraging new ways children can show their friends and staff that they care. Younger children, or those with sensory issues may find not hugging harder than others. Here is a lovely [short film](#) that explains to children what they could do while we can’t hug others.

## 9. Think Review:

Continually review your support plans, to adapt to the changing situation and needs of the individual. The impact of this Pandemic will be long lasting so please have realistic expectations of outcomes.

- For a child who is previously looked after: sometimes referred to an EPPLAC (Education Plan for Previously Looked After Children) or EPAC (Education Plan for Adopted Children) meeting with parents and any other professionals that parents/guardians feel would be appropriate.

Think about holding a meeting to find out:-

- How the child has coped with Lockdown and Home Learning. What strategies parents / guardians / carers have put in place that have helped the child.
  - What the child/parent/ carer / guardian worries are about returning to school.
  - Other additional information (bereavements in the family/community etc)
  - Sensory needs and how families have supported children with this (see Sensory section above)
  - Share and celebrate personal achievements – including non-academic successes.
  - Agree transitional objects that may help the child, particularly those with separation anxiety. For example, transitional friendship bracelets that Parent/ carer / guardian and child can both make, or a decorated water bottle, message in packed lunch box etc.
  - Agree a daily contact method – who, when and how will staff and parents contact each when sharing successes and issues which may arise at home and school.
- For more information and guidance around these meetings, please refer to our [website](#).



- If a child has an EHCP, think about reviewing this earlier than you would normally do to consider and assess if their needs have changed over the last 6 months.

## 10. Think Virtual School:

Virtual Schools have a responsibility to provide support for children in care and for advising schools, parents and guardians on the education of Previously Looked After Children. We offer a wealth of knowledge and experience and are only too happy to support you in supporting your cohort of children. Please do contact us for advice, support and signposting. For children who have been previously looked after, families can contact us directly, should they wish for independent advice on education or home learning – we are here to help!

### **We are able to offer schools with Previously Looked After Children:**

A wide range of online training (provided by AC Education) to any member of school staff who supports Previously Looked After Children.

Access to our extensive Reference Library covering support on attachment, adoption and trauma.

Educational Psychology group discussions throughout the year as well as individual case discussions.

Further resources and information via our website [Website](#)

Please email us for advice and more information on our service [VSKPLAC@kent.gov.uk](mailto:VSKPLAC@kent.gov.uk)