

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

Looked-After and Adopted Children

Classroom strategies

Who this covers

This article covers:

- Children currently in foster care
- Children in residential care
- Children adopted from care
- Children placed with kinship carers
- Children who used to be looked-after (now living with their birth family or guardian)

In the UK these children are often called LAC (looked-after children) or PLAC (previously looked-after children) and have additional educational entitlements. In the US, children in foster care have specific educational rights under the Every Student Succeeds Act. Procedures differ; the underlying needs are similar.

Why these children often have specific needs

Children in this group nearly always have a complex backstory. Most have experienced:

- Disrupted attachment (often multiple times)
- Loss — of birth parents, sometimes siblings, sometimes places
- Often, abuse or neglect that led to the original removal
- The cognitive and emotional cost of rebuilding trust with new caregivers
- Sometimes, contact arrangements that destabilise the school week
- Often, multiple school moves
- Identity questions complicated by their history

Many children in this group are also high-achieving, resilient, and thriving. The strategies below are about awareness — not assumptions.

Common school patterns

<p>Difficulty with transitions</p> <p>Year transitions, school transitions, even daily transitions can trigger old loss responses. Plan extensively for any change.</p>	<p>Hyper-vigilance</p> <p>Many of these children have learned that adults can disappear. They watch the room. They watch you. Patience helps.</p>
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Fear of contact days If the child has contact with birth parents, these days often disrupt. Fridays are particularly fraught (anticipation of weekend contact).	Fierce independence Some children push adults away because they've learned not to depend. Don't take it personally; hold steady warmth.
Rejection-sensitivity Reading rejection into neutral interactions. A teacher being briefly distracted may be experienced as abandonment. Repair quickly.	Identity questions Especially in adopted children. 'Where do I come from?' 'Why didn't my birth mum keep me?' Questions can surface in unexpected places.
Days that hurt Mother's Day. Father's Day. Family tree projects. Family photo activities. Birthdays. Christmas. Plan ahead — these can be agony.	Educational gaps Children who've moved schools multiple times often have patchy academic foundations. Not because they're not bright — because of disruption.

What tends to help

Strategy	Why
A consistent 'safe person'	One reliable adult in school can be transformative
Predictability	Their world has been unpredictable; school can be the one place that isn't
Advance warning of changes	Even small changes destabilise; warnings reduce the activation
Care with sensitive topics	Family tree, baby photos, Mother's Day — talk to the carer first
Strong communication with carers	They often have insights that aren't in formal records
Recognise contact days as significant	Friday concerts and Monday meltdowns are often connected
Holding in mind their history without naming it	They are more than their care status; treat them as the whole child

Working with adults around the child

These children often have a complex 'team around the child': • Birth parents (sometimes) • Foster carers / adoptive parents • Social worker • Virtual School Head (in the UK — every LAC has one) • Designated Teacher (in UK schools, every school has one) • Therapists, possibly Key



points: • ROUTE COMMUNICATION through the right people. Don't talk directly to birth parents without checking placement plan. • SENSITIVE INFORMATION goes to the designated teacher and SENDCo only. Not the wider staff room. • ATTEND THE PEP (Personal Education Plan) meetings if asked. Your input matters. • ADVOCATE GENTLY for what the child needs. The carer, social worker, and school all share responsibility. • DON'T assume the carer is the parent. Use language like 'who lives at home' rather than 'mum and dad.'

Sensitive topics — how to handle

BABY PHOTOS / FAMILY TREE: For some children, these are traumatic. Talk to the carer in advance. Adapt the project — 'a person who is special to me' / 'a place I love' instead of 'family tree.' MOTHER'S DAY / FATHER'S DAY: Can be agony for some children. Some schools now do 'special person day' or 'caring person day' as alternatives. Talk to all carers (LAC and otherwise) before such events. FAMILY HOLIDAYS / PHOTOS: Avoid 'tell us about your family Christmas' as a writing prompt. Use prompts that work for ANY family situation. COMING-OUT MOMENTS: A child may share their care status with peers, planned or unplanned. Have a quiet conversation with them and the carer about what they feel comfortable sharing, when, and how. WORDS USED: Don't refer to their 'real mum' (their adoptive mum is real). Don't ask 'who's your real family?' These small phrases land hard.

What you don't need to do

- You don't need to know their full history
- You don't need to be a therapist
- You don't need to fix their attachment difficulties
- You don't need to compensate for what they've been through

What you DO need to do is be a steady, kind, predictable, attuned adult in their school day. That's enormous. That's the work.

