Relationships Australia
SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Post Adoption Support Services

Intercountry Adoption:
Information for Teachers

Post Adoption Support Services (PASS)

Post Adoption Support Services (PASS) is a program of Relationships Australia SA and is funded by the Department of Education and Child Development. PASS provides information, support and services to anyone whose life involves adoption, both local and overseas.

Services PASS provides include:

- Information on a broad range of adoption issues, including school issues
- Referral to adoption-friendly services
- Face to face and telephone counselling on adoption related matters
- Participation in parent teacher interviews
- Support and assistance in searching for birth families, either local or inter-country
- Support and mediation with family reunions
- Links to adoption community groups
- Support groups for people affected by adoption

PASS also runs seminars and workshops throughout the year, addressing a broad range of adoption-related topics such as:

- Parenting an adopted child
- Search and reunion
- Identity and family making
- Insights into adoption (plus many more).

Contents

About this booklet

This booklet is by the Post Adoption Support Services (PASS) at Relationships Australia SA and provides information for teachers who have children in their class who were adopted from overseas.

It contains general information on common backgrounds and issues that may impact upon an adopted child. PASS encourages you to discuss the information within this booklet, and the particular experiences or needs of the child, with the parent of any child adopted from overseas in order to understand what is relevant for that child.

PASS welcomes the opportunity to talk with schools about issues for students with a background of adoption.

PASS can also be involved in conversations with the adopted student's teacher and parents to explore appropriate support for the student.

If you would like more information or support for adoption related issues, please contact Post Adoption Support Services (PASS). Contact details for PASS and other services that may be of assistance are listed at the back of this booklet.

The adoption process

All adoptions in South Australia occur through the Adoption Family Information Service (AFIS) of the Department for Education and Child Development. For overseas adoptions, Australia operates in accordance with the requirements of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption.

Each overseas country has its own criteria for prospective parents, and this varies depending on the country. Often the process of overseas adoption can take a number of years.

The process for children varies considerably depending on why they have come to need adoption and their country of birth. The reasons children may come to be adopted include:

- Becoming orphaned
- Abandonment
- Removal from their birth family by their country's authorities due to neglect or abuse
- Relinquishment by birth parents or extended family.

Children may be infants at the time of these experiences or live with their birth families until an older age. Some children are adopted from as young as six months to one year of age, following the loss of their birth family. Others may reside in foster homes or orphanages for many years prior to being adopted.

Once the adoption is finalised in Australia, both the adoptive parents and the child have the same legal standing as if the child were born into the family.

For more information about the legislation and process which govern inter-country adoption, visit the Attorney General Intercountry Adoption Branch: www.ag.gov.au/FamiliesAndMarriage/ IntercountryAdoption/Pages/default.aspx

Language of adoption in the school setting

Intercountry adoption is just one of many ways in which families are formed. As with all children, it is helpful for intercountry adopted children to have their experience about how their family was formed normalised in the school setting. Recognising that there are many ways in which families are formed is important and assists children to have a broad understanding about families.

Examples include:

- Blended step families
- Same-sex parents
- Single parents
- Being parented by a grandparent or other relative
- Living with a foster family.

Adoption is a permanent, legally binding family forming event, giving a child all of the same rights as if he/she was born into the family, and therefore has some significant differences to fostering.

Modelling appropriate language around adoption is important. We suggest using the terms that the adopted child and his/her parent uses. These might include:

- 'First' or 'birth' family
- 'First' or 'birth' mother or 'first' or 'birth father'
- For their adoptive parents and siblings, most adopted children refer to them as 'Mum and Dad' and brothers and sisters

NB: Children of primary school age may use the term 'real' when talking about their first family, as often this is the word their peers use when asking about their history. It is suggested that when speaking to the adopted child you follow their lead and use the terms they use, but with others, gently provide them with the alternative terms around adoption.

For more information about this you may like to look at an information sheet by World Families Australia, Adoption Language and Education in a primary school setting. www.worldfamilies.org.au

A background of institutionalisation

Many children who are adopted from overseas have spent a period of time living in an orphanage. Some institutions offer excellent facilities and ample nutrition, whereas others lack the capacity to provide for even the most basic of needs.

Some children may have experienced abuse by other children, or by carers in institutions. In many orphanages, due to lack of staff, babies are not held to be fed which may lead to ongoing issues around food and nurture. Some children may never have personally owned items. Others may be unfamiliar with the set up and roles within a nuclear family and may take some time to understand parental roles, sometimes assuming that one parent has a sibling-like role in the family instead of a parental role.

Children may have developed excellent skills for coping and thriving in an orphanage which does not equip them positively in a family or school environment. Hoarding, stealing and gorging food, endearing themselves to strangers, and ensuring they are always first and in control are excellent qualities for a child in an institution to develop, but often cause problems with making friends and living in a family once they leave the orphanage. It takes time to teach new ways for children to gain different skills which are more appropriate in their new life. It is not unusual for challenging behaviours to resurface in times of stress and/or transition.

'Adverse Impacts on Children Living in Orphanage Institutions' by Dr. Victor Groza. Found at www.adoptvietnam.org/adoption/health-institutional-impacts.htm on 2 November 2015

As a general rule, a child who has spent time in an orphanage, prior to being adopted, is more likely to demonstrate 'post institutionalised' behaviours. Some of these may be evident at school. There are a variety of views on how to best manage some of these behaviours in a post institutionalised child. Try to have conversations with the parents about how they prefer to manage the behaviour to ensure consistency across the school and home environment.

For example, food issues may surface at school. Some suggest managing this by providing the child with consistently available food (healthy snacks) and nurturing experiences to help the child to learn that food and nurture are now something which they can trust will be always available in their life. When a child has a problem with gorging, a parent can encourage the child to come and sit with them while eating so that they learn to replace gorging behaviours with emotional comfort. Another approach is that food is carefully and strictly regimented.

Although these approaches are very different, they recognise the strong link between food and emotional nurture and that the child will need time and help in recognising their bodily signs of being full.

'Hoarding Food: Saving Up For A Hungry Day' By Rick Delaney, Ph.D. Viewed at:
 http://www.fosterparentcollege.com/info/connections/Connections-033107.pdf on 2 November 2015

'Subtle Signs' by Arthur Becker-Weidman, Ph.D.
Viewed at: https://arthurbeckerweidman.wordpress.com/2010/03/09/subtle-signs/ on 2 November 2015

Grief and loss issues

It is normal and expected, for children to experience a sense of loss and grief, after leaving behind what is familiar. Not knowing your birth parents, or not being able to stay with them, hurts. Adopted children may react to the loss of familiarity in smells, language, friends/peers and environment when they leave their birth country and come into their adoptive home.

Children may revisit this sense of loss throughout their lives. The fact that a child is loved and belongs within their adoptive family does not mean that they will not feel the pain of not knowing their biological family.

Children adopted from overseas often thrive physically once they are in a family environment. However, behavioural indications of the grief and trauma they have, and are, experiencing are not uncommon. These may include hyper-vigilance, physical symptoms such as stomach aches, tantrums, regression in speech/toilet training, depression, anger, or having unusually controlling behaviour with adults or peers. These behaviours may escalate at times of stress. Common triggers for escalation of behaviours include:

- Times of transition (such as changing year level or schools)
- Change of routine (such as having a relief teacher)
- Perceiving rejection (such as a perceived snub from a friend or a teacher)
- Experiencing a new loss (such as the death of someone in the family or a pet).

Please refer to the section *'Trauma and its Impact on Behaviour'* (page 9), for more information.

Grief from adoption issues often resurface throughout life as the growing child becomes able to comprehend their experiences and losses in more depth.

Attachment development in children who have experienced attachment disruption

Healthy attachment normally develops through the early months and years of a child's life in response to their needs being met 'well enough' and 'often enough' by a consistent care giver.

All adopted children have experienced at least 2 major losses and interruptions to attachment. However generally children adopted from overseas have had far more placements, disruptions and losses than this. Many have experienced multiple placements and some have had no opportunity to form attachment to a trusted adult figure.

Children who have had multiple attachment disruptions may not trust adults to keep them safe or believe that an adult will provide for their needs. This may lead to hyper-vigilance, extreme independence, or alternatively, extreme clinginess. In addition, they may not trust their adopted parent to return after an absence or may not believe that their adoptive parents will remain in their lives permanently.

The brain is malleable and children who have lacked this opportunity to form attachments are often able to learn and develop these social skills later in life - but they may need extra support and understanding in this area from parents and others involved in their lives.

Adopted children may range from being securely attached, to having mild to severe attachment challenges. At the severe end of the spectrum, 'Reactive Attachment Disorder' (RAD) is a mental health diagnosis that affects a very small number of adopted children. It is a clinical diagnosis made by a psychiatrist.

A child's attachment security changes over time, becoming more secure as they learn to trust in the permanence of their adoptive family. They may also regress at times of transition or stress such as starting school, a parent going back to work, or the child going into a new grade.

For more information please visit this article by Bruce Perry viewed at http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/bonding_help.htm on 2nd November 2015

Trauma and its impact on behaviour

Many children who have been adopted from overseas, even at a young age, have experienced trauma. Every child is different in how their early experiences affect them during their pre-adoptive period and how these experiences will impact them later in life.

Children who find the school environment too stressful may manage well during the day but 'melt down' on returning to the safety of the home environment. The stress they are experiencing may make it more difficult to retain or absorb new information and/or give rise to physical symptoms such as headaches and tummy aches.

There are a number of other less obvious issues which may be seen in children who have experienced early trauma and/or attachment disruption that impact on their ability to respond to common interactions in a home or classroom setting.

Children who have experienced trauma and/or significant attachment disruption tend to respond best to adults who are consistent and calm. If the teacher knows the child well, they may be able to notice when a child is feeling stressed, or predict which activities are likely to cause anxiety in the child. Calmly intervening with nurturing and supportive one on one time ('time in') is more likely to prevent 'melt downs' and disruptive behaviour than giving the child a warning of consequences or using 'time out'.

'Effective Back-to-School Strategies' by Heather Forbes.
Found at: http://heather-forbes.blogspot.com.au/2015/08/effective-back-to-school-strategies.html on 2 November 2015

'Child Abuse and Neglect: Effects on child development, brain development, and interpersonal relationships' by Arthur Becker-Weidman, Ph.D.
Found at http://www.articlesbase.com/mental-health-articles/child-abuse-and-neglect-effects-on-child-development-brain-development-psychopathology-and-interpersonal-relationships-727165.html on 17 February 2009.

Hyper arousal and dissociative responses

Children who have had early trauma and/or attachment disruption may respond to management of behaviour in unexpected ways. This may be the result of an ongoing hyper-aroused state with an exaggerated 'fight/flight and freeze' response. These children may be triggered by any perceived threat, which may include non-verbal cues, the 'threat of a consequence' to contain behaviour, or a perceived rejection by a classmate or adult.

For example, a child may perceive being rejected by a peer who has merely turned away from her during play. A child whose 'fight/flight' response is triggered by a sense of rejection may respond by hitting out aggressively or by

withdrawing into themselves and being unable to concentrate on the learning in the classroom for the rest of the day.

A child being calmly told by their teacher that if they persist in a behaviour that they will need to go to the office (for example) may perceive this as a threat, and instead of being able to respond appropriately, may have a 'fight/flight' reaction which prevents them from being able to think rationally and instead brings a strong negative reaction.

Transitions, such as changing classes or teachers, or class to play time, may escalate a child's tendency to hyper arousal or dissociative reactions.

Strategies found to help reduce stress in children with hyper arousal and dissociative responses include:

- Keeping the child close to a calm adult by seating them at the front of the room
- Seating them next to a calm classmate
- Having a predictable routine
- Showing 'kind' body and eye language
- Using a calm and kind voice
- Bringing them close to a trusted adult during transition times, for example having them spend a few minutes with their teacher at the beginning of play time and on returning to class.

'Maltreatment and the Developing Child: How early child experience shapes child and culture, from The Margaret McCain Lecture Series' by Bruce Perry. Viewed at http://www.lfcc.on.ca/mccain/perry1.html on 2 November 2015

Pervasive shame

Children who have experienced neglect and/or attachment disruption may have what is described as a 'pervasive sense of shame'. This sense of shame can lead children to assume that any reprimand or consequence is given because they are intrinsically bad, rather than it being a consequence of a negative behaviour. It has been described as, "Shame is an all or nothing experience, I am totally worthless from head to foot, other people will fully recognise how full of badness I am."
Birchmore (1997)

Shame is very different to guilt because guilt comes from doing something wrong and so the person can make amends by apologising, accepting the consequences for their behaviour or changing their behaviour.

A sense of shame may lead a child to behave in negative ways because they feel so badly about themselves. They may try to avoid the feeling of shame by:

- Withdrawing from caregivers and peers
- Physical or emotional aggression
- Denying their own needs through extreme dependence, not thinking for self, hurting self
- Being very busy,
- Competitiveness or thrill seeking.

A sense of shame also significantly impacts on their ability to respond to management of their behaviour. When reprimanded, they may respond with what Dan Hughes and Kim Golding have called the 'shield of shame'. The child uses rage ('you always blame me'), denial (it wasn't me), blame ('it was Billy's fault'), and minimizing ('I didn't hit him hard') as a way of protecting themselves from the unbearable sense of being unworthy and bad.

'Busy' behaviour

Some adopted children demonstrate very busy behaviour. There are a number of possible reasons for this, including:

- Temperament: the capacity to demand physical and/or emotional nurturing is a protective factor for surviving difficult early experiences
- A state of hyper-arousal resulting from experiences of early trauma
- Lacking the capacity to self regulate. Infants and young children learn self-regulation of emotions through their attachment figure. Therefore children who lacked opportunity to attach to a 'good enough' care giver may have not had the opportunity to learn this skill
- Malnutrition in their early years has been linked to hyperactive behaviour, even when there has been just one episode in the first year of life.

Sensory issues

Children adopted from overseas may be susceptible to sensory integration issues as a result of poor nutrition, lack of sensory stimulation and little social interaction in an orphanage setting. A child with sensory issues may be overly sensitive to bright lights, noise, crowded or busy environments, and other things which are usual in a classroom setting. This may affect their behaviour.

Younger emotional age

Children adopted from overseas, especially those who have been in an orphanage setting, may have a younger emotional age than their same aged peers. This may impact on their peer interactions, their capacity to self calm (regulate), and their reactions to stressful situations. It may help to consider their emotional age, rather than merely their physical age, in as far as expectations and management of behaviour. This may be a consideration for teachers and parents around class placement decisions.

'Navigating Uncharted Waters: School psychologists working with internationally adopted post-institutionalised children' by Boris Gindis, Ph.D.

Found at http://bgcenter.com/communique-article.htm on 2 November 2015

'Sensory Integration Disorder in Children Adopted from Institutions' by Harriet White McCarthy. Found a http://www.comeunity.com/disability/sensory_integration/sensory-integration.html on 2 November 2015

'Teaching Trauma in the Classroom' by Heather T. Forbes. Found at: http://media.wix.com/ugd/7f907f_8d02c5db4f7d4428a5d7d7b8f8cf7a68.pdf on 2 November 2015

'Intercountry Adoption: Where a child's history includes an experience of malnutrition (with or without neglect)', by Post Adoption Support Services

Precocious (early) puberty in children adopted from overseas

Research shows that children adopted from overseas, particularly those adopted after 2 years of age, are much more at risk of precocious puberty. Precocious puberty is the term for children showing signs of the onset of puberty before the age of 8 years (girls) or 9 years (boys). Adult height may be affected. Effective treatment is available and it is important that parents seek early medical assessment if this is an issue for their child.

Supporting family to support the child

Teachers are key sources of support for adoptive families, particularly those who are new and first time parents of a school aged child. First time parents of older children may find the school environment very daunting, as they are still in the early stages of getting to know their child, whereas the parents of their child's peers often have confidence from knowing their child since birth. Children who do not yet share a fluency of language with their adoptive parent may lack the ability to share with their parent about their school day or express their concerns and anxieties about school.

It is often difficult for any parent, and particularly for first time parents, to know whether a problematic behaviour is a learning disability, a reaction to a traumatic past, adjustment to their new situation, difficulties in communicating, or whether it is a developmental stage.

Therefore, it is especially important for new adoptive parents to be encouraged to have frequent communication with the class teacher to keep them closely involved in supporting their child.

Intrusiveness from others

Children who are adopted from overseas are often questioned by others because of their visible differences in appearance compared to their parents. These questions may be simple curiosity and not bother the child at all, or they may be intrusive questions about the child's personal history which may cause distress.

It is important to keep in mind that the child's pre-adoption and adoption story is their personal information and that it is not the right of others to know it, nor the right of others to share it without consent. However, some children love to share their story with others and may like to show their 'Life Book' (a biographical scrap book) to the class, or they may choose to share their story with their teacher as a trusted adult.

Having a conversation with your student and their parent about how they would like questions responded to and what sort of support they would like may be greatly appreciated, as teachers are often well placed to assist the adopted child in responding to questions in a way which does not intrude on their privacy.

Issues which may arise for peers

Other students, when getting to know the student who is adopted from overseas, may become aware for the first time that children may lose their parents. They might become anxious about this potentially happening to them and wonder if they too, may be sent to another country to live with a family they do not know if their parent dies or is unable to care for them. These anxieties can be eased, by open conversations between children and adults about welfare in Australia and the plans made for the children if the adults caring for them became ill.

Language development

Inter-country adopted children often lose their first language prior to learning English. They are learning a first language for a second time, rather than learning a second language. Therefore they have a period of time when they may be without a language. This may be different from a migrant family where a child has the scaffolding of their existing language while they learn the new language.

'Language-Related Issues for International adoptees and adoptive families' by Boris Gindis. Viewed at http://www.bgcenter.com/adoptionPublication.htm on 2 November 2015

'Speech and Language "Mythbusters" for Internationally Adopted Children' by Sharon Glennen. Viewed at http://leader.pubs.asha.org/article.aspx?articleid=2289686 on 2 November 2015

Learning issues

Many adopted children, even those who come at an older age following a period of institutionalisation, catch up on physical, language and learning milestones surprisingly quickly. However, a number of parents report that learning difficulties become evident later in primary school, and a child who has coped well in junior primary begins to fall behind. This may be due to a number of reasons, including:

• Lack of understanding of language and sounding of words which becomes more noticeable in upper primary learning, such as with spelling and English tasks

• Gaps in their learning in early years, such as not understanding the differences between historical, mythical and current concepts

• Auditory processing and/or sensory integration challenges which may be more prevalent in children who experienced early deprivation.

Unfortunately because their initial 'catch up' of learning has been so spectacular, sometimes when challenges start to become evident, they may not be recognised as quickly.

Early input through ESL support, Occupational Therapy and other specialised support, may be of benefit to children early on if they have arrived at an older age, even if they appear to be learning well during their first year of school. Given the increased capacity of the brain to learn new pathways early in childhood, it is thought that the earlier these interventions take place, the more effective they will be.

School placement and uncertain age

Some children adopted from overseas may not have their actual age known. For those who are adopted at older ages their estimated age may be several years different to that of their actual age.

It is not unusual for a primary school aged child who has come from an orphanage to have social and emotional functioning similar to that of a pre-school aged child. Those who have spent a number of years in an orphanage may have considerable gaps in their developmental experience. For example it is common for them to have not learned the difference between mythical creatures such as fairies and dragons, to dinosaurs or living animals.

'School Readiness and School Placement of a Newly Adopted Post-Institutionalised Child' by Boris Gindis. Viewed at http://www.bgcenter.com/adoptionPublication.htm on 2 November 2015

School projects relating to family

School projects around family origin can sometimes be a cause of distress for inter-country adopted children. Children may feel conflicted on what information they should present and how to protect their privacy, or they may not have the information available to them to complete the project. Often the teacher is able to give options as to how the project can be presented to allow the adopted child flexibility in completing it.

These projects may also be difficult for non-adopted children, such as fostered children, children with same-sex parents, or children living with grandparents. Therefore consider giving alternative ways of doing these projects for the whole class rather than singling out an adopted child as needing to do something different which may be distressing to the child in itself.

Projects and classroom activities which may be worth discussing with your adopted student and their parent are:

Bringing in a baby photo:

Many children adopted from overseas do not have photos, and sometimes have no recorded height, weight and other information about when they were babies.

An alternative may be to bring in a 'favourite photo' or a photo of any baby.

Family trees:

There are numerous options for how a family tree can be done, such as showing both birth and adoptive family, showing only the adoptive family or only the birth family. However, a child may be concerned about not knowing the information or not knowing what to present because they don't want to be seen as different by peers or because it may invite intrusive questions, or because they may feel they might hurt their adoptive families' feelings.

Many alternative ways of doing family trees that show birth, adoptive, foster and extended family are possible. You may want to provide the option for children to choose their family tree or instead for them to do the family tree of someone they know or a historical figure. This provides a way that the child can avoid being made to feel they need to disclose private information that they don't wish to share or that they feel makes them stand out as 'different'.

Genetic traits in a family:

Many adopted children do not know the medical or genetic history of their birth family and are visibly different to their adoptive families.

An alternative may be to give the option to choose another member of their family or a pet.

Some differences for intercountry adoptive families and refugee families

Some of the issues for children adopted from overseas are similar to the issues which face refugee and other immigrant children. However, some differences which are significant are:

- The newly adopted child has not only moved from a familiar country and culture, but initially lacks the protective factor of being with a family he/she knows intimately and feels safe and connected to

- The newly adopted child often does not have a shared language with adoptive parents

- Parents of intercountry adopted children are generally more familiar with Australian services, educational and medical facilities, and supports available. Therefore they may be more able to advocate on behalf of their child for services

- Depending on the parent and the age of the child when joining the family, adoptive parents may be less confident in their parenting role and may lack a social peer group of parents with children of a similar age.

Websites for additional information

International Adoption Articles Directory (articles specific to school issues and language development): www.bgcenter.com/adoptionPublication.htm

Beyond Consequences Institute: Trauma Informed Solutions for Parents, Schools, and Professionals: www.beyondconsequences.com/

Services and supports

Post Adoption Support Services (PASS), Relationships Australia SA

49a Orsmond St, Hindmarsh 5007
Phone: (08) 8245 8100
Fax: (08) 8346 7333
Email: passinfo@rasa.org.au
Websites:www.rasa.org.au; www.socialrelations.edu.au

Adoption and Family Information Services

Department of Education and Child Development
Level 7, 108 North Terrace, Adelaide 5000
GPO Box 1152, Adelaide, 5001

Post: GPO Box 1152 Adelaide 5001
Phone: (08) 8463 3620
Fax: (08) 8463 6188
Website: www.families.sa.gov.au

SMART Training, Australian Childhood Foundation

www.childhood.org.au/for-professionals/smart-online-training

"The SMART (Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma) program is a state wide initiative funded by the South Australian Government Department of Education and Children's Services, as part of the 'Keeping Them Safe' child protection reform agenda. It seeks to enhance the capacity of school and early childhood personnel to effectively respond to the needs of children and young people who have experienced abuse and trauma."

Articles:

A Memo to My Fellow Teachers: When it comes to adoption, instructors need to check their curriculum and their stereotypes
http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/MemoToTeachers.pdf

Policy & Practice: Policy & Practice Papers: Adoption in the schools: a lot to learn, Promoting Equality and Fairness for all Children and Their Families, by Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, Centre for Adoption Support and Education Authors: Susan Livingston Smith, Debbie Riley
http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/2006_09_adoption_in_the_schools.php

Trauma and School
http://www.postinstitute.com/articles/71-education-and-the-child-of-trauma.html

For further information or support regarding adoption related issues, please contact Post Adoption Support Services at Relationships Australia SA.

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January 2016