

## Coping with Change/Transition/Uncertainty for Looked After Children



**Change/Transition/Uncertainty** can create huge anxiety for children with attachment difficulties, especially when it's not expected. Transition times such as moving rooms, finishing a term or after holidays can evoke unconscious feelings of abandonment. The imminent loss involved, triggers high levels of anxiety. Plan, monitor and review

transitions times across the school year. Beginnings and endings are highly charged for young people with attachment difficulties. It can help to have low key consistent checking-in with the child to say goodbye or welcome back and reminding them what is happening next may help them stay focused, relaxed and make smooth transitions.

Managing change is important in terms of avoiding anxiety build up, these children need the supports we might consider appropriate for students with ASD, and they benefit from the use of social stories to rehearse the scenario of changing classrooms, school trips or visitors to the classroom. These children generally require additional warnings that change is coming and visual aids can supplement verbal reminders for forewarning change.

The change from home to coming to school in the morning can also be an issue for these children and this can be a very significant time in terms of setting the tone for the day. It can help to:

- Meet and greet the child personally
- Start the day a little earlier to check out environment
- Display and go through the days plan (verbally and visually)
- Establish routines and daily rituals and structure to help engage the child and build up predictability
- Time tasks - sand timers are helpful especially with independent work
- Ending tasks/transition to next task sensitively –if a child with attachment difficulties has to leave a preferred task unfinished because time has run out they can react very badly. Due to their issues with permanency and constancy they do not believe they will be let back to it at a later time. So it helps to fore-warn endings, use timers and if necessary provide the child with a 'I won't forget card' where the teacher can write on the back in relation to the specific activity. This will help avoid flash points at transition times, for example, 'John will have 5 minutes to finish his Lego tower after play'



**Being 'Kept in Mind' to reduce stress associated with change** – Children need to know that

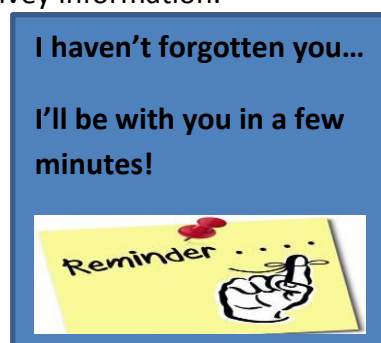


there is someone who cares about them and thinks about them, thinks about what they are doing, and how they are feeling, this is the basis of security. We can help children with attachment difficulties feel safe and happy by letting the child know they are being kept in mind. Every class teacher will have experience of the child who constantly talks, interrupts, the 'attention seeking child'. These children are often desperate for some connection; they appear to be saying 'please remember me – I can't bear feeling unconnected'. They could be reframed as the 'attending needing' rather than attention seeking.

These children have difficulties with the concepts of permanency and constancy, they feel that people don't exist if they are not in front of us connecting directly. These children often experience profound abandonment so they feel I've got to keep you focused on me to manage my anxiety. If we can interpret the behaviour through this lens of understanding it is not simply an irritant but a need being communicated. We work with these children to let them know that despite not being actively engaged or physically connected, we can keep them 'in mind'.

There are a number of strategies that can help with maintaining a connection:

- The child may experience each daily separation from parent as a fresh abandonment. They may have a deep rooted **fear of being out of sight = out of mind**. Children may be encouraged to carry **sensory reminders** – the use visual images such as a family photo on a key ring, transitional objects, a post it note in the lunch box or perfume on a card/piece of material to remind children they are not forgotten when away at school. Teachers can also provide sensory reminders for days they may out, give the child a special pen and explain you will get it back the following day.
- Ensure good home-school communication- carried out directly between adults, the child is never to be used as an intermediary or to convey information.
- Reminder Cards – a little printed card that you can pass to the child while continuing with the whole class lesson.
- Check-In card – allow the child to go see the principal/teacher for a 'chat' rather than being sent down for misbehaviour.



**Transitioning from Primary School to Secondary School**

Looked After Children can find transfers between schools particularly difficult, even when they are age-related and expected. The transition from primary to secondary school represents a period of heightened vulnerability and one in which the early identification of

children's mental health issues is crucial. For many looked after children, school represents their most stable environment.

The following strategies should be considered to ensure a bespoke enhanced transition package is implemented to support the Looked After Child:

- Information should be transferred over so that all teachers know a profile of strengths and difficulties
- Visits to school should try to take place over 2 terms
- Draw up a map of school/ give opportunity to take photos to become familiar with school setting
- Take photos of the buildings, rooms and teachers to aid memory
- Carers to be given the opportunity to visit school
- Timetable given as soon as possible – keep several copies on view around the house
- Consideration of help required for organising work
- Consideration of help required in note-taking (if required)
- Consideration of where locker placed in school, and method to transport books and equipment
- Mentor/tutor introduced before new term
- Buddy system in place for first 2 terms
- Adaptation of tools if required such as protractors, rulers, pens
- Extra time allowed for homework
- Work written down for individual on an ongoing basis if required
- 3 way communication card between school – different teachers, with home and with the individual
- Do as much preparation for the school day the night before – put out clothes, place the school bag by the door