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NEWSLETTER

How may an adopted child's past impact on their learning, and how can we support them?

This article was written by Marie-Hélène Delorme, Vice-Chair of Enfance & Familles d'Adoption (EFA) and chair of its schooling committee. She also teaches at a primary school in Paris. The article is a follow-up to her presentation at the annual conference of the Mission de l'adoption internationale (the French Central adoption authority) in December 2021.

May adopted children have more problems at school due to their pre-adoptive history? Are they failing at school?

The EFA's 2015 investigation into what happens to young people who have grown up in an adoptive family¹ in France showed that most (53%) of them achieve at least a baccalaureate.² Among adoptees without health problems or risk of emotional deprivation and who have not had to repeat a year of primary school, 70% achieve a baccalaureate, which is close to the national average in France.

We therefore need to make less drama about the issue of adoptees' education, as most of them have a 'normal' education: **adoption is not synonymous with academic failure.**

Nonetheless, a large minority of them encounter ongoing problems throughout their school years, partly due to their experiences prior to adoption. For these children, education is more complicated, and it can sometimes affect relationships within the family and impact all aspects of the young person's life.

The problems encountered at school are inherent to the act of learning and may be experienced by any child, whether or not they are adopted, due to:

- specific language and learning disorders (dyslexia and other 'dys-' conditions) or attention deficit disorders with or without hyperactivity (ADHD);
- health problems or disabilities.

The child may also have ongoing problems at school with learning, attention or behaviour due to their experiences prior to adoption and their abandonment. Before adoption, they may have experienced health problems (e.g. malnutrition, illness) or emotional deprivation (e.g. neglect, successive foster placements, abuse). They may also have experienced problems related to conditions in utero, such as alcohol or drug use or high stress levels in the biological mother. The undeniable trauma of being given up for adoption may result in distrust and insecurity. For those adopted as an older child, through domestic or intercountry adoption, their pre-adoptive past may weigh even heavier on them. On arrival in the new adoptive family, the child may feel disorientated (new environment, new culture, sometimes new language, etc.).

We should not distinguish adopted children as a separate category of students at school, or we risk stigmatising them and their families. Instead, we need to better understand their learning needs and issues

¹ *Le devenir des jeunes ayant grandi dans une famille adoptive : enquête sur les adoptés et leurs frères et sœurs* [What happens to young people who have grown up in an adoptive family: a study of adoptees and their siblings]. Summary available (in French) on the website www.adoptionefa.org

² However, 90% of biological children of the same adoptive families achieve at least a baccalaureate, in line with statistics for children of managerial staff in France.

and help their parents and teachers to provide them with better support and guidance.

What are the main specific learning difficulties experienced by some adopted children?

- *High level of anxiety and stress.* When under stress, the child's body produces a substance called cortisol, which at chronic high levels has negative impacts on the brain. High stress levels will hinder or even block a child's understanding, short- and long-term memory, distinctions between what is and is not important, and assimilation of new information.
- *Problems with paying attention and managing emotions* that are not always due to ADHD³ and that may cause behavioural problems in the classroom and school.
- *Problems with structuring space and time* because the child has experienced malnutrition or neglect (e.g. no regular care or meals, lack of 'attachment' figure).
- *Emotional deprivation which impacts on availability for learning⁴:* The child is absorbed by their thoughts and worries and is afraid of taking the risk of learning and making mistakes.
- *Attachment problems or disorders which impact on the relationship with the teacher and the quality of learning⁵:* A child who has an 'insecure-avoidant' (solo) profile thinks they have to work things out for themselves without asking for the teacher's help. If they cannot manage to do the task required, they will pretend to be working and will not do what they were asked to. A child with an 'insecure-ambivalent/anxious' (*velcro*) profile is unable to initiate or continue cognitive effort independently; they are dependent on reassurance from the teacher. They remain passive faced with the task and are in a hurry to ask for help without trying to do it themselves. Finally, a child with an 'insecure-disorganized' (*sumo*) profile does not trust adults. They are in survival mode, either opposing the teacher or running away and avoiding all learning.
- *Problems with re-establishing their identity, particularly during adolescence, with a focus on the*

search for origins: This can affect self-esteem and result in difficulty looking ahead to the future and in disengagement with school.

How can we support adoptees and provide them with the conditions for successful learning?

There can be no quality learning without a 'secure' and caring environment. It is important that the parents make arrangements for the child's education before they join the family. Where a child is adopted at an older age⁶, especially through intercountry adoption, it is essential that they spend some time with their family before attending school. This is because building an attachment to their adoptive parents will make them feel secure and valued and give them a desire to learn, which will have a positive impact on their education. In France, this recommendation conflicts with compulsory education from the age of three, and the requirement to integrate the child into a class based on their age rather than their academic level. Exemptions may be granted on a case-by-case basis⁷ by the regional inspector for State education. Parents can choose to home school, but an exemption is now also required for this.

The parents should then strive to maintain a good dialogue⁸ and positive partnership with State education staff, to ensure the child can take up their place at school and be supported as they progress, as with any child with specific needs. When the child first attends the school or college, it is important to discuss with them what details of their background should be shared with the teachers, other parents and classmates.

Each parent must judge the right distance to take from their child's education, and must not hesitate to seek help from outside the family circle. This may take the form of delegating help with homework to a third party if necessary, or attending a group for adoptive parents to discuss their children's successes and setbacks, both in and out of school. It may also be a good idea for parents to adapt their expectations about academic success to their child's actual abilities.

³ ADHD: attention deficit disorder with or without hyperactivity. It is characterized by three symptoms – impulsivity, hyperactivity and inattention – and needs to be diagnosed by a specialist (e.g. psychiatrist, psychologist, paediatric neurologist).

⁴ Serge Boimare, *L'enfant et la peur d'apprendre*, Dunod 2019 (3rd edition) and *Ces enfants empêchés de penser*, Dunod 2019 (2nd edition).

⁵ *L'enfant adopté en difficulté d'apprentissage*, Marie-Josée Lambert, available secondhand as a pocket book published by de Boeck (2015). *La normalité adoptive* by Johanne Lemieux, published by Québec Amérique (2013).

⁶ *Les enfants grands et l'entrée à l'école*, article in *Revue Accueil* No 200, October 2021, *Enfance & Familles d'Adoption* website.

⁷ For newly arrived children who do not speak French as a first language, apply circular 2012-141 of 2/10/2012, which allows children to be placed in a class one or two years below their age.

For all adopted children, see Conseil National de la Protection de l'Enfance, Note 2018-3, *Adapter la scolarisation aux besoins de l'enfant : les enfants adoptés*.

⁸ *L'adoption: le guide à l'intention des enseignants*, EFA – a guidebook to be given to the school director or teacher when meeting with them. Can be purchased from the website www.adoptioenefa.org

Some children encounter long-term difficulties requiring support from professionals (e.g. psychologists, psychomotor or speech therapists), within or alongside school. They should also access the provision⁹ for assistance and educational adaptation and accommodation at their school or college, based on their needs and issues. It is important for parents to

be familiar with this provision¹⁰ so they can discuss it with the teachers to ensure their child benefits.

In conclusion, we need to give our children time to find their way. School is not everything!



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⁹ **The EFA parent factsheets on education** provide information, ideas and solutions, case studies and resources (in French). Topics covered include: What provision for assistance and adaptation is available at school to support children during their education? My child has a disability: what educational pathways are available? What if my child has dropped out: what can we do?

¹⁰ For example, see the French Ministry of Education website <https://eduscol.education.fr/1137/ecole-inclusive>.