
Supporting Adopted Children with Special Needs in the School Setting

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It's that time of year again – back to school, and if you are a foster/adoptive parent of a child whose school year did not end on a positive note last spring, we hope this article will shed some light upon the causative factors regarding early life experiences and adoption that may have contributed to the challenges you and your child faced. Did the school year symbolize yet another year of ongoing frustration, unmet needs, and feelings of helplessness? Or, did you gain some clarity as to the factors that are influencing your son or daughter's academic challenges but are not sure how to remediate them? And finally, have you come to a new acceptance that something's amiss but you don't know what it all means.

No parent wants to see their child struggle in their most important “job” of school. Tearful mornings, countless calls from school, and frustrating homework hassles are the experiences that, unfortunately, may be familiar to many of you. As adoptive parents, you may wonder if being adopted and the experience of adoption increases your child's vulnerability for school performance difficulties. In fact, the interplay between adoption and learning issues is what frequently brings parents to seek specialized support through C.A.S.E. The variables involved are complex and require professionals who have an understanding of BOTH adoption and learning challenges in children and adolescents.

What is the Interplay between Adoption and School Performance?

According to Dr. William Stixrud, a prominent neuropsychologist in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area with whom C.A.S.E. partners to address school issues in adopted children, 1/3 of the adopted children and teens seen in his practice have been diagnosed with Learning Disabilities and or ADHD. Researcher and author, Dr. David Brodzinsky notes in his book, Children's Adjustment to Adoption, “Adopted children are at greater risk than their nonadopted peers for a variety of academic problems, especially learning disabilities and attention deficits.”

As a guest speaker in a previous C.A.S.E. webinar, Adoption and Learning Differences, Dr. Stixrud addressed several factors related to adoption that can create academic risk for children. While too often, we tend to downplay the role of genetics in adoption, Dr. Stixrud clearly delineated a strong genetic basis for dyslexia, ADHD, learning disorders and autism. For example, impulsivity is a symptom of ADHD which can lead to risky behavior and compromised decision making that might result in unintended pregnancy, a common reason why children are placed for adoption.

There has been much research into pre- and post-natal variables that have a detrimental impact on brain development. As Dr. Stixrud explains, maternal stress can impact the development of a fetus' stress response system which has implications for a child's 'executive functioning' (planning, [working memory](#), [attention](#), problem solving, verbal reasoning, inhibition, mental flexibility, multi-tasking, initiation and monitoring of actions.) In addition, lack of proper prenatal nutrition and exposure to toxins including alcohol, cigarettes, illegal drugs, and prescription medicines can adversely impact brain development as well. According to the National Society for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, children who have been prenatally exposed to alcohol are at risk for learning challenges because of distractibility, concrete thinking, lack of organizational skills, and impaired memory.

After birth, traumatic, adverse early life experiences can have a detrimental effect on brain growth and development. The first three years of life are most critical. Dr. Christine Dobson of the Child Trauma Academy outlines the key ingredients needed for healthy brain development: love and nurturing from a primary caregiver; exposure to new people, places, things in the context of a safe, secure primary relationship; and appropriate stimulation to the senses. Many adopted children come from compromised beginnings where they did not experience a healthy attachment with an attuned parent in a safe, nurturing and enriching environment. Instead they may have experienced chronic neglect, abandonment, inconsistent caregiving, multiple caregivers/loss of caregivers, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and/or witnessing abuse/violence while in the care of birth family or other caregivers, foster parents, or institutions. Dr. Dobson notes that traumatic experiences “trump” the impact of normal developmental experiences on the “organizing” brain. And, as Bruce Perry notes, the human brain is a “use it or lose it” organ. There are critical “windows of time” that, when missed, can result in cognitive delays and deficits, some permanent, as with language development.

Traumatic early life experiences are also detrimental to a child’s ‘stress response system,’ creating an increased vulnerability to stress in the future. Children with trauma histories often live in a constant state of arousal, or hyper vigilance. Many traumatized children suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder whose symptoms are similar to ADHD – inattention, impulsivity, difficulties with emotional regulation, and social skills deficits. These trauma-related challenges can all compromise school performance.

For international adoptees, learning English as a second language can impact early academic progress. However, Dr. Stixrud notes that the research on language development of internationally adopted children is very encouraging.

How do the emotional challenges of adoption affect school performance?

Adopted as an infant, Sally, a bright, outgoing third grader began to have difficulties in school. She wasn’t focusing on her classwork, denying to her parents that she had homework, and seemed more withdrawn socially, especially at recess. Her teacher suspected that Sally had ADHD and shared her concerns with her parents. After thorough neuropsychological evaluation, Sally was diagnosed with ADHD and mild learning disabilities. Medication and a tutor helped alleviate some of the school difficulties, but Sally remained withdrawn and her parents wondered if being adopted had some relevance to her struggles.

The family consulted with C.A.S.E. and after meeting with Sally and her family, the therapist shared her impression that Sally was struggling to make sense of what it means to be adopted. She had many questions about her birth parents and was clearly grieving her loss. Her withdrawn behavior and trouble concentrating in school was likely a combination of both her learning and emotional challenges. Family counseling was recommended to help the family learn how to communicate about adoption, and to help Sally to express her grief. After several months, there was much improvement.

At C.A.S.E., we certainly see children and teens that have BOTH – neurologically based difficulties like ADHD or LD that impact learning, and who also are grappling with emotional challenges related to adoption. The early grades of school are when children can cognitively understand what adoption means. As they strive to make sense of their adoption story-why they were placed for adoption- they think about birth family connections, what it means to be adopted, being from another country or being a different race from their adoptive family –there’s a lot on their minds... which can interfere with academic performance. In addition, for those children with learning difficulties, the processing of these issues can

be much more challenging. They may need specialized support to comprehend the complexities of being adopted.

Children who are diagnosed with learning challenges often report feeling different from their peers. Add to that feelings of difference related to being adopted, one can see how adopted children/teens can face many challenges in the social domain at school. Unfortunately, these issues of “differentness” can also lead to being teased or bullying about adoption or because of their “special need.” In addition, children with trauma histories may bring their emotional and behavioral issues into the classroom.

Building partnership with the school

To be your child’s school advocate, the first step is to open a dialogue with teachers and other important school staff. You want to glean as much information about how they see your son or daughter and offer any historical information – pre and post adoption experiences, previous academic performance, and professional evaluations to help them better understand the factors that may be contributing to your child’s challenges.

Experience has shown us that a strong, comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation can provide the basis for understanding that is critical in determining effective remediation. Certainly parents can ask to have their public school provide the testing. Unfortunately, schools have criteria that must be met in order to justify providing this service. Many children who are struggling may still not meet these criteria and parents may encounter difficulty in getting the school’s cooperation.

For adoptive families, the evaluation process can be compromised when professionals (school psychologists, psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers, other specialists) are uninformed about the psychological/emotional impact of adoption. We all know that teachers’ lives are quite demanding, and more often than not, they have not been given the opportunity to receive the education needed to understand adoption. As your child’s best advocate, you need to become “an adoption educator.” You can give them resources to help them understand your child.

As parents we want the very best for our children. When it comes to academic challenges, parents are often uncertain what to do and where to turn. We hope this article has offered the reader some insight into factors which may contribute to your child’s academic performance.

We hope that this knowledge will empower you in the challenging job of being your child’s advocate. Remember that you know your child better than anyone else. Offer clarity about what you know both from a historical perspective and current overview of their educational, social and emotional development. Ask for perspectives from teachers and other school personnel that have a relationship with your child. Reach



nurture.
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out to other adoptive parents in your community to seek recommendations of professionals that are adoption competent.

Most importantly, remember that your child needs affirmation from you that you love them, are not upset with them and will help them feel better about school by accessing the appropriate resources. They may be feeling as helpless as you but can't figure out how to make things better! So as you enter this new school year, we encourage you to develop a plan that will foster a positive school experience for your child.