

Case Studies

Peter

Peter is in Year 3. He lives with his grandmother who is his special guardian. His birth mother lives in the family home intermittently, tending to come and go without warning. She takes no role in parenting Peter. Peter finds it very difficult to let adults be in charge at school. He often takes control of situations, telling the other children when it is time for break or lunch, and being very 'bossy' when he is playing. He is sometimes very affectionate towards his class teacher, often finding reasons to chat or call out to her. At other times, he can express a lot of anger towards her, shutting himself in the toilet and telling her he hates her.

Peter's grandmother and class teacher identify that Peter behaves similarly towards them both. They wonder whether Peter might feel that he is unloveable, and expect adults to behave in a very unpredictable way. They agree that the world must feel quite scary for Peter. Together they make a plan to show Peter that he can trust adults to be reliable and caring, and that he himself is loveable. They both use 'PACE' with Peter, being playful, accepting, curious and empathetic. The SENCO identifies a key worker in school who can build a strong relationship with Peter, with regular 1:1 time built into his timetable. When Peter has a bad day, the class teacher takes the time to acknowledge the difficult day, letting him know that she still likes him and wants him in her class. School staff supervise Peter's peer interactions more closely, and practise waiting for his turn, and letting other children make decisions about the game. The Headteacher arranges an after-school training session on attachment and trauma for all school staff. All the adults who have contact with Peter in school agree on a script to use when Peter uses controlling behaviour: "We know it can be scary to let grown ups be in charge. In our school, the children can trust the grown ups to keep them safe." Peter's grandmother seeks advice from the adoption support service about how to set boundaries with Peter's birth mother so that she cannot come and go from the family home.

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Sara

Sara is in Year 7. She was adopted at three, having lived with her birth mother and two foster families. She had some difficulties in primary school, but has found things much more difficult since joining a big secondary school. She sometimes disappears to the toilet for long stretches of time, texting her mum in a panic to ask her to collect her. When things are very difficult Sara runs out into the road and tries to make her way home. At other times, she becomes aggressive, threatening to attack staff and pupils with heavy objects such as chairs.

Sara's adoptive parents meet her head of year and key pastoral staff. Together they come to understand that Sara's fight and flight behaviours happen when she is overwhelmed with stress and fear. They make a plan to help Sara feel safer at school. Sara is encouraged to visit the learning support unit when she arrives at school, where the staff are glad to see her and talk her through her day. All staff agree that Sara can return to the learning support unit whenever she feels overwhelmed, and will not be told off for leaving the classroom. When Sara comes to the unit during the day, a member of staff quietly sits with her. Once she feels calmer, she gets her calm box and does a soothing activity for ten minutes. The member of staff then works with Sara, working out where she needs to be, planning for any problems which may come up, and sending her back to class with an explanatory note. Sara and her mother agree that they will text each other at lunchtime each day, to check in and stay connected. They also choose matching necklaces, and staff remind Sara that she can touch her necklace to feel connected to her mother throughout the day. Sara and her parents access therapy through the adoption support service, which helps her to learn about how her brain works and how she can recover when she feels her survival brain taking over.

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Kyrece

Kyrece is in Reception. He lives with his adoptive mother, who has cared for him since birth, initially as his foster carer. Kyrece was removed at birth because of concerns about his birth parents' alcohol abuse and domestic violence. He finds it very difficult to sit on the carpet at school, and is constantly 'on the move.' He does not seem to connect together his actions with the consequences, meaning that he makes the same mistakes again and again. He is very impulsive in the classroom, calling out, fiddling with everything, and getting into trouble for not thinking things through. Kyrece has some learning support but doesn't seem to retain the information.

Kyrece's mother and SENCO agree that it would be helpful to have an assessment for foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and Kyrece's mother goes to the GP with a supporting letter from the SENCO. Aware that the assessment findings may be unclear, they agree on a support plan for Kyrece using strategies which are helpful for children with FASD. The adults working with Kyrece act as his 'thinking brain', linking his actions together with the consequences for him: 'Because you listened carefully, you knew exactly what to do!' Kyrece is given a sitting spot and wobble cushion to help to ground him when he sits, and a fiddle toy to help him keep his hands to himself. When Kyrece calls out, his teacher uses a special signal to remind him to put his hand up and wait. At first, she comes to him very quickly, gradually increasing the length of time for which he is able to wait. Kyrece's learning support is reorganised so that he has shorter, more frequent sessions. The TA receives training from the literacy support service to deliver an intervention with lots of opportunities to revisit and over-learn information, so that Kyrece becomes fluent in his basic skills. Kyrece's class teacher attends a training session about supporting children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, and shares the key messages with the other members of staff who work with Kyrece.

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Electra

Electra is in Year 6. While her friends are getting excited to move to secondary school, Electra presents like a much younger child. She sucks her thumb and needs to have her big soft toy with her at all times. She is emotionally vulnerable and cries easily. She is happiest when she can play with much younger children. She finds it very difficult to separate from her adoptive dads at the start of each day, and has started to get so distressed that they find it difficult to get her out of the car and into school each morning. They are concerned that if she stops coming into school, it will be very difficult for her to start attending again.

Electra's parents and school staff use the 'developmental wall' (see guide) to think about all the experiences which Electra missed out on as an infant and child. They agree that while they want to build her skills, they must first focus on reducing her anxiety and filling in the early building blocks. They identify a key worker who is able to meet Electra at the car each morning. There is a member of staff on standby in case the key worker is not in school that day. Electra and the key worker come through the main entrance of school, as it is calmer there. They make a cup of hot squash and a piece of toast and sit together chatting about Electra's favourite tv programme. Together they look at Electra's visual timetable for the day, and the key worker points out the parts of the day Electra will particularly enjoy. The key worker settles Electra into the classroom and tells her she will check on her at breaktime. At lunchtime, Electra goes to help in the Reception class, where she can play with younger children and toys. She gets lots of positive feedback for being a Reception Helper. At the end of the day, Electra's key worker checks back in with her, going over the timetable for the next day and pointing out something to look forward to. Gradually, Electra agrees to leave her big soft toy in the key worker's room, and keeps a special piece of soft fabric in her pocket to stroke. Electra's parents meet the SENCO and key worker each week to review the plan, and to hear whether things are improving at home.

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Demi-Rose

Demi-Rose is in Year 11. She has very angry feelings towards her adoptive family and her school. She feels disliked by the friends she has had since primary school, and says that she doesn't belong anywhere. In a recent science lesson, she swore at a teacher who asked her to use photographs of her parents to work out where she inherited her eye colour and hair colour. She was given a detention and refused to attend this, meaning that the behavioural sanctions have quickly escalated. Demi-Rose recently told her adoptive mother that other students make comments about her adoptive status, calling her 'Tracey Beaker' and saying it's no wonder she's in foster care and nobody wants her. Demi-Rose's parents worry that she has made contact with her birth relatives via Facebook as she has become very secretive about what she does online.

Pastoral staff and Demi-Rose's parents meet to identify ways in which Demi-Rose might be helped to feel more included in school life. The school learns that Demi-Rose is a talented piano player, and agree to ask her if she would like to assist the musical director with the school play. They also identify a core group of friends who were supportive to Demi-Rose in primary school. With Demi-Rose's parents' consent, the SENCO agrees to speak to them quietly about what they can do to include Demi-Rose in their group at playtimes and lunchtimes.

The science teacher is asked to apologise to Demi-Rose, explaining that he now understood that the question had been upsetting. The senior leadership team sets aside some time on the next INSET day, asking all staff to look at which parts of their curriculum might need to be modified to include looked after and permanently placed children.

The senior leadership team decides to use National Adoption Week to teach factually accurate information about fostering and adoption. They invite a soap opera actor who was adopted to speak about his experiences in assembly; suddenly Demi-Rose's peers stop making derogatory comments and instead are just interested. They still ask her some intrusive questions, but Demi-Rose's parents have practised with her at home, using 'WISE up' so she can decide whether to Walk away, Ignore them, Share some information, or Educate them more generally.

Demi-Rose's parents ask the adoption support service for support both for them and for Demi-Rose with making safe decisions about contact. They are given some life story work to help Demi-Rose to understand and come to terms with the reasons why it was unsafe for her to remain with her birth family.