

## **Post Adoption Information Sheet No 45**

### **5 Important aspects to building a secure attachment with an adopted child**

#### **1. Being available**

This involves being physically and emotionally available to meet the child's needs. To achieve this, it is necessary to manage your own feelings, such as frustration, anger, anxiety or rejection. Parents and carers may need to remind themselves of the feelings and needs that may be underlying a child's challenging behaviour.

Practical strategies:

- Ensure the child feels cared for and nurtured when sick, hurt or sad
- Respond promptly to the child's signals for support or comfort or reassure the child that you will respond as soon as possible
- Manage separations carefully with open communication about why it is happening and how long it will be
- Ensure the child knows how to contact you when you are apart
- Allow the child to take a small item or photo from home to school
- Let the child know you are thinking of them when you are apart

#### **2. Sensitivity**

This involves putting yourself in the child's shoes and thinking about what they may be thinking and feeling in a given situation. It is also important to reflect on your own feelings and share them appropriately with the child instead of acting on them unconsciously. This may increase the child's awareness that others have thoughts and feelings that are sometimes different from theirs.

Practical strategies:

- Anticipate what will cause confusion and distress for the child and avoid it if possible
- Express interest in the child's thoughts and feelings

- Provide a 'commentary' of the feelings experienced by yourself and the child where appropriate
- Help the child recover/ repair the situation/ make things better after losing control of his/ her feelings and praise them when they attempt to do this/ achieve this
- Name and talk about feelings in everyday situations (e.g. "your friend is going on holiday tomorrow, I wonder how they are feeling about it?")
- Reflect on events and relationships – discuss mixed feelings and feelings that change over time
- Use play to help the child make sense of the world, how things work and cause and effect
- Use stories or puppets to develop empathy in the child (e.g. "poor owl, how does he feel now his tree has been cut down?")
- Use television programs/ films to help the child reflect on why people feel different things and how they can feel different things at the same time

### **3. Acceptance**

It is important to convey to the child that they are unconditionally accepted, despite any difficulties that may exist in relation to their behaviour or circumstances. It is possible to approach difficult behaviour that does not undermine the child's self-esteem. It is also important for the caregiver to value and accept themselves, so that their own emotional resources do not become depleted.

Practical strategies:

- Praise the child for achieving small tasks and responsibilities
- Offer the child a brief explanation for why behaviour is not acceptable and a clear indication of what is preferred (e.g. "if you shout it's really hard for me to hear what you say. I want to be able to hear you, so please talk in an ordinary voice")
- Use dolls, toys, games and books that promote a positive sense of the child's ethnic, religious and cultural background
- Ensure the child's ethnic, religious and cultural background is valued and celebrated in the household
- Model acceptance of difference in your words and behaviour
- Model that it is ok not to be perfect
- Help the child to list and think about all the things they have done that they feel proud of. Use photos and other mementos to record these events

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- List, alongside the child, all the things that make you feel proud of them. This can include acceptance of limitations (the time a child did not achieve at something but was able to accept not winning)
- Ask the child to teach you something that they are good at – such as computer games or telling jokes
- Seek out activities that the child enjoys and can be successful in

#### **4. Co-operation**

It is important to consider how you can work with the child to form a co-operative partnership.

Practical strategies:

- Allow the child to make choices (e.g. what cereal they would like to choose at the supermarket, the meal for a family dinner or what to wear for a certain activity)
- Negotiate with your child within firm boundaries to ensure that safe and reasonable limits are set and compromises can be reached that are comfortable to you
- Use co-operative language (e.g. “Would you like to come and have a sandwich after you’ve washed your hands?” rather than, “Wash your hands before you eat your sandwich”)
- Find shared, pleasurable activities that the child enjoys and that produce a clear result (e.g. baking cakes)
- Introduce games that promote co-operation, turn-taking and team work
- Seek opportunities for the child to co-operate with other children (note: you may need to be present to monitor this)
- Only tackle one problem area at any one time – work on them gradually with the child until there are signs of progress and acknowledge the progress

#### **5. Belonging – Create a sense of family membership**

It is important that the child knows that they are accepted unconditionally as a full member of the family, while also acknowledging their sense of connectedness to their family (either through contact with their other family or through open discussions within their adoptive family). The goal is for the child to experience a sense that they are safe and secure within their adoptive family, but are also free to think and talk about their family. Long-term this can translate into a coherent sense of self and a feeling that they belong and can be connected to more than one family.

Practical strategies:

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- Talk about the benefits and challenges of having more than one family
- If available, have photographs of the child’s family wherever you would like to keep them (in a bedroom, living room, book or album)
- Ensure discussions about the family do not create either a negative or an idealised image of the family
- Find models in television/ books/ other media that have more than one family
- Watch for triggers such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and Christmas and find ways of indicating (where appropriate) that it is ok to give cards to more than one parent or to choose one rather than the other at different times. Alternatively, create a ritual so the child can also honour their family at these times
- Ensure that significant others (such as classroom teachers) are aware that it is important to address family issues in a sensitive manner (consider the above ideas)

Please phone us if you wish to talk further about any issues raised in this information sheet.

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