

What is a looked after child?



A looked-after child is a child or young person in the care of the local authority. Most looked-after children live with foster carers, with a smaller number living in secure units, children's homes or hostels. Some children and young people are looked after because parents are struggling to cope, and others have been removed from the family home due to significant risk of harm. While looked-after children are more likely to experience mental health difficulties than their peers, it is important to remember that not all looked-after children will have a mental health problem.

What can school staff do to support the mental wellbeing of looked-after children?

- 1. Avoid stigmatising children and young people** or making them stand out. Teachers need to be very sensitive and should not assume that everyone in the school, including their peers, knows that they are looked after.
- 2. Treat children and young people as individuals.** Not all looked-after children will have had a traumatic early upbringing. A school's response should identify and respond to children and young people's individual needs.
- 3. Trust is very important.** It is important not to label children and young people because of their behaviour or previous experiences. Remember you may be one of very few adults in their lives that they feel they can trust.
- 4. Be aware of the risk factors.** Looked-after children are four times more likely than their peers to have a mental health difficulty. The more risk factors a child or young person has been exposed to, such as poor housing, poverty and maltreatment, the higher the likelihood of significant delays in cognitive and emotional development.
- 5. Children and young people may misread** certain situations and emotions. For example, if a teacher's expressions are very serious, some pupils may interpret this as threatening and react in a disproportionately hostile or aggressive way.
- 6. Teaching emotional literacy** around social skills can be beneficial, especially if this is part of the class lesson plan, and not just for specific children or young people.

