

Attachment and early trauma

When a difficult start affects learning, and how tutoring can help

For adoptive, kinship, foster and birth families · for parents and carers of primary aged children

Children learn to trust adults and manage big feelings through **safe, consistent care** in their early years. Where that start was disrupted, by neglect, loss, frightening experiences, illness or time in care, a child's brain can stay on **high alert**. Many of these children are adopted or cared for by relatives, but not all. None of this is about how they are parented now, and with the right understanding, children can and do recover. **Safety and relationships come before learning.**

What it can look like

Hard to trust adults

Expecting to be let down, testing boundaries, or being overly friendly with strangers.

Always on alert

Scanning for danger, jumpy, easily startled; a raised voice can trigger fight or flight.

Needing control

Bossiness or refusal, because being in charge feels safer than trusting an adult.

Deep shame

Feeling they are bad, so praise is rejected and mistakes feel unbearable.

Younger than their age

Emotionally and socially, many children function younger than their years.

How it can show at school

- Struggling with change, supply teachers and unstructured times.
- Difficulty concentrating, which can look like ADHD.
- Spoiling work or friendships just as they go well.
- Big reactions to small events, or switching off entirely.
- Seeking attention constantly, or hiding from it.

Why sanctions often backfire

Time out, losing privileges and public praise can all feel like rejection to a child who already expects it.

Approaches based on **connection before correction** usually work far better.

Endings and change

Holidays, new classes and the end of a session can stir up old feelings of loss. These times need preparing for.

Strengths worth noticing

Resilience, sensitivity to others, humour, creativity, and a strong loyalty to the adults they come to trust.

Often found alongside

ADHD, autism, speech and language needs, learning difficulties, anxiety and sensory needs. Some of these overlap with trauma and can be hard to tell apart.

Extra support in school

Children who are or have been in care have a **Virtual School** to champion their education, and schools can receive **Pupil Premium Plus** funding. Tell the school if your child was adopted or left care under a special guardianship or child arrangements order.

“Every child learns, some just need a different path.”

Nicola, Mossgrove Tutoring

Why one to one makes a difference

A child who does not feel safe cannot learn well. One consistent, predictable adult, in the safety of home, is exactly what these children need, and the relationship becomes part of the learning.

What sessions look like

- **Same adult, same time, same shape** every week.
- **Connection first:** a warm, relaxed start before any work.
- **PACE:** playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy, an approach widely used with these children.
- **Low key, specific praise** that does not feel overwhelming.
- **Mistakes made safe**, so shame does not take over.
- **Endings planned:** breaks are warned about well ahead and goodbyes are handled with care.

A typical session

Connect: a chat or a short game together.

Learn: focused work in manageable chunks, with choices built in.

Regulate: a movement or calming break if needed.

End well: something your child enjoys, and a reminder of when Nicola is coming back.

Nurture experience

Nicola has run nurture groups in school, which are built on these ideas: small, calm, predictable settings where children can catch up on the early experiences they missed.

Working together

You know your child best. Before starting, Nicola will ask what has happened so far, what helps and what makes things worse. A short update follows each session, and with your permission she can link with your child's teacher or SENCo so that everyone is working to the same plan. Nicola follows Mossgrove's safeguarding policy, which is shared with every family.

Being realistic

Tutoring is not therapy. It can give your child a positive, steady relationship with learning, but therapeutic support for trauma comes from specialist services.

Small things that help at home

- Keep routines predictable and explain changes in advance.
- Calm first, talk later: reasoning does not work while a child is in fight or flight.
- Name the feeling behind the behaviour: "I think you're scared."
- Keep your child close when they are struggling, rather than sending them away.
- Repair after conflict, every time, so they learn relationships survive.
- Find support for yourself; this is demanding parenting.

Getting more help

Adoptive and special guardianship families can ask their council or regional adoption agency for an assessment of support needs, which may give access to funded therapy.

Where to find out more

Adoption UK: adoptionuk.org

Kinship: support for kinship carers, kinship.org.uk

Beacon House: free resources, beaconhouse.org.uk

SENDIASS: free, impartial advice on SEN support in school. Search "SENDIASS" with Gloucestershire or Herefordshire.

About Nicola

Nicola has worked in primary schools since 2003 and has been a Higher Level Teaching Assistant since 2008, specialising in special educational needs, including running nurture groups.