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How to choose the right school - Key questions for parents to ask secondary schools

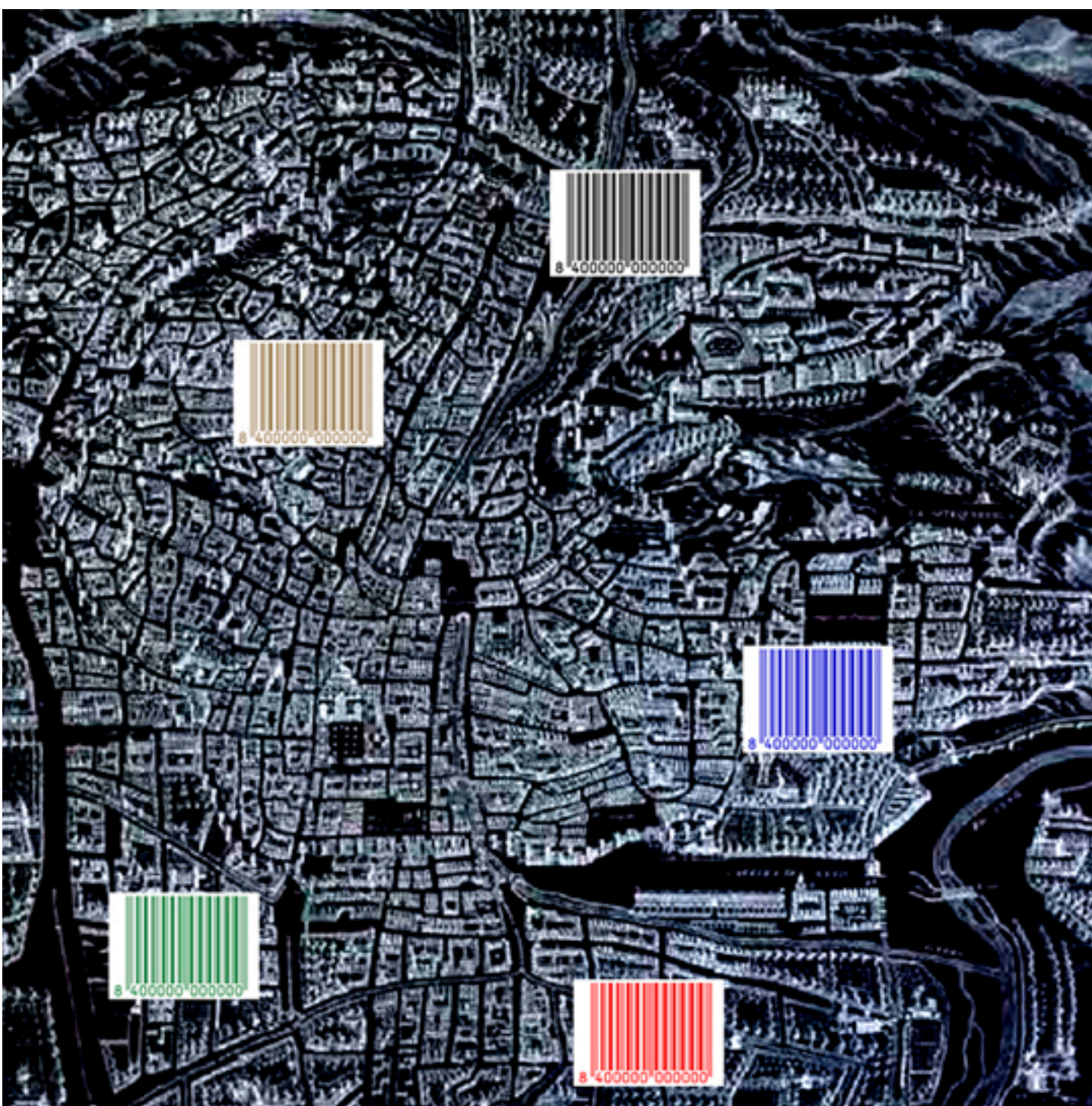
Parents often tell us that they don't know what to look for when choosing a school. In consultation with experienced adoptive parents we identified some key questions for parents and schools to consider. Not all will be relevant for every child and may be different in different countries. It's unlikely that any school will be doing all of these; look for flexible schools which are willing to listen and learn and are proactive about developing support to meet each child's needs

Have staff received training on attachment and the impact of early trauma and loss?

Who was involved in the training? Were Teaching Assistants/reception staff, lunchtime supervisors included? What has been the impact throughout the school?

How does the school provide consistent key relationships for children with attachment needs?

Is there nurture time or a nurture group? Are there non-teaching pastoral staff available throughout day? Does the school have learning mentors? Is the support consistent and predictable for the child (e.g. only 1 – 3 key staff)?



Is there a safe space for children when they need to calm down or regulate?

How does this work? What does the safe base look like in school? Is it provided on a Drop-in basis or does child need specific permission to attend? How is it staffed?

What is the behaviour management policy?

Does the school recognise that cause-and-effect consequences may not be effective for children with histories of trauma and loss? Does the school apply the policy flexibly to best meet the needs of each child? How does the school moderate its use of detention or isolation (exclusion from a class) for children who may be retraumatized by this?

What support is in place for children who find unstructured times difficult?

Does the school have a lunch club; drop-in base; structured games on playground; social skills groups? Are any drop-in spaces staffed consistently? And how do children and young people know about these things, how do they access them and are they signposted within the school?

How does the school provide structure and consistency?

Are year 7 (11 years old) pupils for example in a permanent base/classroom? Are there lockers for children's belongings? What is the approach to staff sickness and supply teachers? Does the school provide advance notice of timetable changes, building work etc.? Is the timetable on the school website so parents can prepare child at home?

How does the school support the Year 6 to Year 7 transition?

Does the school have a flexible approach to incorporating extra visits for vulnerable children? Are there opportunities for children and their parents to see the school both empty and busy? Does the school provide children and young people maps and photographs to support their orientation to a new school? Is there a summer club that can help the child get acquainted with the school and the staff?

How does the school share the information you give them about your child's background and needs?

What systems do they have in place to do this? Are there meetings to support this and/or policies and guidance in place to support schools in meeting the needs of adopted and care experienced children and young people? How does the school work with parents to decide what they need to know about a child in order to meet their individual needs and how is this shared with key staff?

How does the school share information with parents?

What equipment/kit is needed (uniform/PE kit etc)? Is there a homework timetable? Is there a web-based supported learning environment? Is this used by all staff? Do parents have logins?

How does the school support children who find it difficult to manage their feelings?

Is there a nurture group? Can children have access to calm boxes?? (see separate training resource in library on Calm Boxes and their uses). Is there a calming zone within the school? Have teachers and school staff had emotion regulation skills teaching and coaching? Has the school invested in anger management training? Is there empathy from all staff?

How does the school manage curriculum hotspots i.e. issues which might trigger your child?

Does the school liaise with parents about sex, alcohol, drugs education? How do they pass on information about any triggers to members of teaching staff? Can the school and the parents/ caregivers work together to look at how curriculum hotspots might be adapted to reduce unnecessary triggering of children and young people?