

AUGUST 2016

Adoption

Today

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

10 easy ways to play, learn and connect this summer

**"I'm adopted.
So what?"**

*speaking out
against stereotyping*

Life Beyond Trauma
learning to look up again

**STRENGTH IN
NUMBERS**

help us speak for you

adoptionuk
for every adoptive family



Sally meets

Daniela Szmigielska Shanly, co-founder of Beech Lodge School

Parents of children who struggle to cope with the demands of mainstream school can face stark choices that are often limited to either making the best of a bad situation, home educating or fighting for alternative provision at a specialist school. For many, mainstream education is the only option but this can come at an emotional cost for children and those supporting them.



Daniela

One adoptive parent, Daniela Szmigielska Shanly set out to put this right and to achieve lasting change. In 2013, along with co-founders headteacher Lucy Barnes and therapist Emma Barklem, she opened Beech Lodge School in Berkshire. In June they launched a new initiative called Fagus that aims to improve support for children with additional needs in mainstream education by providing educators with practical knowledge and tools to aid in the understanding of atypical child development. I went along to the launch of Fagus to meet Daniela and ask her what motivated her to co-found Beech Lodge School and to find out about her plans for the future.

Daniela, tell me a bit more about Beech Lodge. What makes it different from other mainstream schools?

Crikey - where do I start? I think you only have to enter our buildings to sense the difference. We are very small - full to capacity but with only 26 pupils on roll at the moment between the ages of 7 and 16, although we have plans to extend our provision up to 96 pupils. We create an environment that is nurturing, supportive and responsive to the individual needs of our pupils

and their families. At Beech Lodge every day is a new day; acceptance, empathy and good humour is embedded throughout our school approach. We have 6-8 pupils in each class with a teacher and TA in each and all of our staff are trained in attachment theory which also underpins our educational policy and practice. Even our behaviour policy has Dan Hughes' PACE woven throughout it. We are committed to emotional and social development, educational development, communication and sensory development as well as having a focus on outdoor learning and life skills. We have an educational psychologist, a sensory attachment trained occupational therapist, speech and language therapist and DDP trained music therapist. We are a child-centred school with an emphasis on encouraging the individual to flourish and it is for that reason we allow children to choose what they wear and express themselves. Being comfortable helps children to relax, feel happy and enjoy more fully the learning process and besides, it's lovely and colourful!

How pivotal has your experience of being an adoptive parent been in your work at Beech Lodge?

Oh my goodness it was the defining reason I set up the school. My experience as an adoptive parent of a child who was effectively 'dying' in school was crippling to experience. I was astounded by the woeful lack of understanding in education about the needs of children who have experienced developmental trauma and have attachment difficulties. Despite my best efforts marching into school with armfuls of leaflets and books by Louise Bomber and Dan Hughes, organizing inset days with Adoption UK and Family Futures etc nothing seemed to change in their approach to my very traumatized, very confused little boy. I had been shouted at by teachers, told he should 'get over' his traumatic past and learn how to behave properly.

I knew I had to do something to stop this and to give my son and others like him the right educational environment to be accepted and understood, foster resilience, develop a growth mindset and reach their potential.

All of our parents when they come to Beech Lodge have 'hit a wall' with their child's school. They, like me, have walked the 'walk of shame' and have fought and advocated for their child to little or no avail and having acutely experienced that myself I was determined never to let that happen to families whose children attend Beech Lodge.

You've just launched the Fagus project. What exactly is it and what do you hope it will achieve?

Fagus is a unique, easy to use educational resource which provides a system for schools to monitor, review and support children's emotional and social development in a similar way to academic progress. Fagus comprises a portfolio of 13 developmental guides - one for each of the emotional and social domains from attachment through to socialisation. Each guide has an introduction to the developmental area which introduces the emotional or social domain, defining any key terms and a developmental map which describes commonly seen developmental progression within the developmental area between birth and 19 years. There are also online materials which include developmental checklists to make developmental profiles of pupils.

We hope it will achieve 3 key aims: 1) To improve knowledge and understanding in schools of children's emotional and social development; 2) to help teaching staff apply this understanding to set developmentally appropriate goals for pupils in emotional and social domains and 3) to provide a tool to monitor and track emotional and social developmental progress.

If readers think Fagus might be something that could help their child's school to better understand and support their child, how can they go about suggesting it for consideration by the school's leadership team?

We have literature available and they should direct their Head, class teacher or SENCo to our website www.Fagus.org.uk to read all about it or come and talk to us. They should also point out that Fagus was principally created for pupils with attachment and trauma related difficulties so if their child is in receipt of Pupil Premium Plus, Fagus is an ideal resource to allocate some of that funding towards. Schools have to be accountable to Ofsted for that funding and they often struggle to know what to spend it on so Fagus would be a good recommendation. They could also mention that Fagus would give teachers the opportunity to gather additional data about progress and support teaching practice by furthering understanding of emotional and social development.

How have you found the drive and energy to achieve all you have with Beech Lodge at the same time as being an adoptive parent?

I don't know - I'm knackered most of the time! Seriously, I think when you have a child that struggles in school you find the fight and energy to keep going. I am also a Leo which I think probably helps - arrogance and a can-do attitude of self-belief! I think I have read nearly everything there is to read on adoptive parenting and I try to parent therapeutically. I am very well supported by my husband and family - my mother is also an adoptive mum - my brother is adopted and is also in the process of adopting and so we all have a good understanding of what goes into having a family with permeable boundaries! I try to be there as much as I can for my children so I work ridiculous hours often very late into the night and I don't watch much TV - only the news and QI - and I do try to look after myself by going to the gym, doing yoga and eating healthily, but having a school means you have school holidays - which is a bonus!

You are clearly someone with a lot of drive and passion.

What next?

Ha ha! Yes, I suppose I am. I guess the immediate next step will be to open our larger flagship school and then open more Beech Lodge Schools around the country; small nurturing schools with our vision, ethos and values at their core for children whose needs cannot be fully met in a mainstream setting. There is a very great need for

schools like ours and I'm up for the challenge!

If you could wave a magic wand over the British education system, what would do to change it?

Oh gosh - what wouldn't I change! That is a very big question. For a start I would make sure that all teachers are trained in child development and attachment theory and adopt a more caring and empathic approach. I would make sure that vocational learning is as valued as academic learning and for teachers to see all behaviour as communication. To be honest I think we would all agree that education has become so hell bent on being results driven that it has lost the focus on the child and that we're being educated to become good workers rather than creative thinkers. Children with restless minds and bodies are being stigmatized and not cultivated. They come in all shapes and sizes with different talents and learning styles and that just doesn't seem to be taken into consideration. I am a big fan of Sir Ken Robinson and totally adhere to his mantra that we should be nurturing not undermining creativity in schools. I'd probably put him and Michael Rosen in charge of the education system (without calling for a referendum) and make Fagus a mandatory resource in all schools across the country.

